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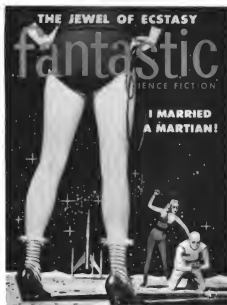
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VOL. 32 NO. 3



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# This Is The First Issue—

—of the new, expanded *Amazing Stories*. Into it, have gone lots of sweat, some tears, and much prayer. We have always considered the readers of our magazine as a sort of family and this is definitely not an editorial illusion. Certainly, we have one of the most loyal and long-standing readerships in publishing history. Your letters prove this. We receive correspondence from readers who refer with pleasure to issues of twenty and twenty-five years ago. We have on record, letters from the sons and daughters of men and women who were loyal members of our family in the late '20s and early '30s.

So to us, *Amazing Stories* is in the nature of a trust and changes are not lightly made. Even though they come under the heading of progress and improvement, there is always the paramount question: Will you like what we're doing to your book?

We believe you will. Certainly, the 16 additional pages will be welcomed. And the monthly novel? How can it miss? We're sure, too, that Dr. Barron's monthly research into the vital, social aspects of life in our fast-changing world will make a big place for itself.

We are of course not losing sight of the fact that good science fiction is the backbone of the magazine. Happily, we find that the very nature of current developments is turning new writers with fresh, vital outlooks, to this medium. They will appear in *Amazing Stories* along with the established top talents with whom you are familiar.

And there are more surprises to come. So keep watching. And keep us posted as to your reactions. The letter column will be back next month—to stay.—PWF.

# AMAZING

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*Man's inhumanity to man has been used as the theme of great literature—of fact and fiction—of history and philosophy. A broad subject indeed, to handle adequately in five thousand words. But we think you'll agree that Henry Slesar did the job in—*

# THE MOON CHUTE

By HENRY SLESAR

ILLUSTRATOR NOVICK

THEY had thrown me into a world of darkness, a prison more confining than the dank stone cell that was my home. I snarled like a wild animal when I heard their footsteps and felt the nearness of body heat. I strained my sightless eyes for a glimpse of their movements, so I could lash out and hurt the sneering strangers who walked into my cell. Once I caught an arm and almost tore it from the socket with the ferociousness of my blind rage. They beat me for that. They chased me around the stone cage with a thick-thonged strap, and beat me until I could feel the blood running down my body. I never begged or pleaded, not at first, but I knew it wouldn't be long before I'd join the

whimpering, groveling chorus of voices I could hear from my cell.

I was in the Moon Chute, the prison of the Blind, the cold and rocky Hell created especially for me and others like me.

My name's Jugg and I'm a Reader. My mother was a Reader, and so was my father, and when I was four years old the mob came to our house, shouting and cursing and teaching me a new use for fire. I don't know why I was spared the burning. Maybe they wanted me to die a different death, a death of the soul, watching my parents scream out their last sounds on earth.

I remember some uniformed men standing around doing nothing about the horror that

was filling the night. I found out that they were officers of the law, state troopers. They didn't have to tell me; I probed their minds with my four-year-old Reader's brain and read their responsibility there. If they had known I was Reading them, they would have been less kind. But I was only four; the branded "R" wasn't on my forehead yet. That came at the age of seven. It was the Law.

But the policemen were kind. Once the mob's errand was done, and they had made their desultory, disinterested investigation of the crime they took me to a precinct house, and I spent the night shivering on a bench. In the morning, I was taken by police vehicle to the state orphanage.

It didn't take them long to find out I was a Reader. I couldn't hide the fact; I didn't have the cunning. Because I was a ward of the state, they made an exception in my case and performed the branding process at the age of five. The branding didn't hurt, but I remember looking in the mirror at the angry red "R" in the center of my forehead, and crying until I tasted blood and salt.

I learned my lessons of hate quickly after that. I found what it meant to be endowed

by a cynical Creator with the ability to read the thoughts of others. I found out how much loathing a Reader caused among normal men, how suspicion and distrust followed those who bore the red "R" on their brows. I found that a Reader must take nourishment from the hatred of the world, if he was to survive.

I reciprocated. I used my power to advantage, to escape from the orphanage. At the age of eight, I was a fugitive. At nine, I was a hardened criminal. At thirteen, I killed my first man . . .

"Who was he?"

I could almost hear the voice of the police psychiatrist again, the gentle-faced man with the foul thoughts, who had examined me just before the trial that sent me to the Moon Chute.

"Who was he?" he had said, from behind the protective one-way glass. If I couldn't see him, I couldn't Read him. Sight is essential to our talent.

"Who was he? The first man you killed?"

I answered casually. "His name was Richter, he ran a drug store on Bleeker Street. I Read him and found out he kept a cigar box full of money



The dread brand seared his forehead—doomed him to a living hell.

under the cash register. When he went in back, I got it. Unfortunately, he came out and grabbed my arm. I hit him with a glass jar that was on the counter. He dropped. I didn't know I had killed him until later."

"And how did you feel about it?"

"I was surprised because he had such a soft head. But he was rotten, like everybody else. I didn't care about his dying."

"Who was next?"

"I'm not sure. It was either a cop named Braff, or a man named Coster."

"And you don't have any feelings of guilt concerning these killings?"

"None!"

"Do you know the difference between right and wrong?"

"I know what's right for me and wrong for me. I know that everybody hates Readers. Why shouldn't I hate back?"

"Everybody doesn't *kill* Readers. The laws that protect Readers are the same that apply to everyone else."

"That's not the way I see it."

"You're thinking about your parents. You think that lynch mob symbolizes everyone in the world, don't you?"

I didn't answer.

"Mr. Jugg, do you know the punishment reserved for Readers who turn to crime? It's the only point of law which is different for Readers than for other people."

"Sure. You send us to the Moon Chute."

"But that's not all you know. There's a special penalty imposed upon Readers to prevent them from ever exercising their peculiar powers for the purposes of crime again. Blindness."

I curled my lip; I didn't want to show my fear.

"It's a dirty rotten trick," I said. "It's bad enough to be sent to that hell-hole, without taking away a man's sight—"

The psychiatrist sighed. "It's not a pleasant thing for the Law to do. It violates one of the essential principles of the code of justice—the principle that guards cruel or unusual punishment. But when the code was written, there weren't any Readers in the world. There had to be special provisions for handling this new-type of criminal; we found that out after Readers were escaping constantly from prisons. The only solution was to make it impossible for Readers to use their powers any longer, by imprisoning them in the most inaccessible



and remote of prisons—and by removing the core of their power. Their sight.”

I couldn't answer him.

“You know your sentence is a foregone conclusion,” the psychiatrist said. “You have no defense. There are too many facts, too many witnesses—”

“I know.”

“Then you can tell me the truth. Altogether, how many men have you killed?”

I thought a minute.

“Nine.”

“And how old are you?”

“Twenty.”

I don't remember much about the trial; I was only allowed to attend for less than three hours. They were afraid of my Reader's brain, afraid I would learn too much from the prosecution. But I still recall the summary of the state's attorney.

“This is a sacred duty,” he had told the jury, his hands gripping the railing. “An unpleasant and harsh duty, but one which we cannot avoid. These men who walk among us, born through no will of their own with this strange twist in their brains, these men we call Readers are as deserving of justice and fair play as all other men. They have suffered greatly through

the fear and prejudices of the ignorant; they have been hounded and persecuted for almost fifty years; they have been victimized and tormented to a point we can only label as inhumane.

“But there is another brutal fact we must face. While we can sympathize with the plight of the Readers, we must also recognize this truth. The terrible power these men have can become corrupt, can be turned to purposes of evil against which ordinary men are helpless as children. *They can read your mind.* Do you realize the significance of that? Do you realize the horror that can come from a Reader turned criminal, a Reader who feels no ethical, moral or legal responsibilities to the rest of the human race? I tell you, a Reader gone bad is the greatest enemy our world faces today.

“But *do* Readers turn bad? Is this poor man on trial today merely an unhappy sore on the fair complexion of the breed? I must say to you, *no*. In the last thirty-five years, out of an estimated Reader population of a hundred and eighty thousand almost *ninety* thousand Readers have been indicted for major crimes! Think of it! *Ninety*

hardened criminals out of every hundred and eighty Readers. And who can say how many *more* Readers are responsible for terrible crimes — without having been caught?

"The inference is plain. The twist that turns their brains turns their souls as well. They are men robbed of the knowledge of good and evil. They are men without morals and human decency. They are criminals, thieves, murderers. Perhaps not all of them; I won't say that. But enough to have filled an entire prison—a prison they call the Moon Chute. It is there I ask this jury to send this man. It is there I ask you to have him taken, where his dreadful power will be plucked forth like an offending eye, where he will cause no more pain and terror and death . . ."

It must have been a good speech. The jury was out less than two minutes.

The last face I saw was that of Doctor Wardell.

I'll never forget that face; how could anybody? It was engraved on my brain forever, like the "R" had been engraved on my forehead.

They left me alone with him. He didn't seem to care about my being a Reader.

"My name's Wardell," he said, in a tired voice. "Look at me carefully. You'll want somebody to hate after tomorrow, and it might as well be me."

I stared at him. He was an old man, but there weren't any gray hairs on his head. All the age was in the crosspatched lines that covered his sagging face from brow to chin.

"Tomorrow?" I said. "What's tomorrow?"

"The operation," he told me gravely. "It's my duty to perform it, as I have for others. I don't want you to be afraid; I'm not the youngest surgeon in the world, but my fingers are young. It will be swift, and painless, and—successful."

"You're going to blind me."

"That's true. I'm going to destroy the optic nerves that give you sight. It won't damage you any other way, but you'll never see again."

I got sick inside.

"I've performed the operation many times. I want you to know that I am skilled." He put a hand to his forehead, as if in pain.

I tried to control the terror inside me. I decided to Read him.

I put out a gentle probe and touched the surface of his thoughts. I received a mood

first, a mood of such sadness that I was almost brought to tears. This man hated his duty; I knew that. Then I probed deeper, and found something else in his mind. Something to do with me.

"Do you know me, Doctor?" I said.

"What?"

"Do you know me? Have you ever seen me before?"

He smiled, without losing the pained expression.

"Yes, I know you, Jugg. That doesn't make my duty any easier. Do you think you know me?"

"No," I said doubtfully. "I don't remember you."

"It was a long time ago. You were a child of perhaps five to six. I was a staff doctor attached to an orphanage near Albany, New York. Now do you remember?"

I shook my head.

"I didn't think you would. But I remember you, Jugg. You were so embittered; hard to forget." He paused. "I remember giving you your anti-bacterial shot. Do you recall that day?"

"No."

"You were unnaturally brave. I remember you, Jugg."

"And tomorrow—" I said.

"Tomorrow," Dr. Wardell sighed. "You must be brave again."

At nine the next morning, I was taken in bonds to the operating room of a city hospital. At ten, a dose of anesthetic obliterated all consciousness. I saw Dr. Wardell's aged, mournful features above me, and that was all.

I wasn't so brave. I was sick with fear and horror, but I knew there was no use in fighting the inevitable. I probed wildly at the brains of my captors, seeking some information that would allow me to invent a last-minute escape plan, but I found nothing in their minds but idle, personal thoughts.

When I awoke, I was in darkness . . .

I don't know if six months or a year passed before I made a friend in the Moon Chute prison.

I was taken through the darkness of space to the darkness of my cell, and I was so filled with wrath and hatred and suicidal impulses that I fought everyone and everything that came in my path. I was a blind, shrieking animal that wanted only to hurt those who had forced this fate upon me.

I spent my first few months in solitary confinement screaming my rage at the world, refusing food, wish-

ing for the release of death. Later, I learned that my experience was the same as other Readers upon first coming to the Moon Chute. Many never survived the first few months.

But I did; and after a while, I began to feel the stirrings of instinct, the instinct that told me: "Stay alive! Nothing else matters. Stay alive!"

That was when I calmed down; and when I made a friend.

I was taken from solitary confinement and placed in a cell block which the prisoners jokingly called Blind Alley; a joke, because all prisoners were blind in the Moon Chute. A sardonic joke at that.

His name was Danny Orcutt, and he had been sent to the Moon Chute almost twelve years before. His voice sounded old, but he told me he was under forty. I enjoyed listening to the tales of his criminal adventures. He had used his power as a Reader to pull a succession of con games that had netted him close to a million dollars. He had twice undergone plastic surgery to remove the red "R" from his forehead, but it hadn't prevented his eventual capture and blinding.

One day, I said:

"What are chances, Dan-

ny? Anybody ever break out of this place?"

"Nobody, not ever," he said bitterly. "You can't do it without eyes. You can't even get started."

"How about bribery? A guy with all your loot—"

"All my loot's been confiscated, and don't think the guards don't know it. Besides, you'd have to bribe the whole damn space fleet to get out of the Moon Chute. There's no place to go but Earth, and no way to get there except by prison supply vessel."

"I have to be hopeful," I said ferociously. "Or else I go nuts."

"Sure, who am I to discourage you? But take my advice—you'd be better off playing it their way. It took me five years to find it out. At least you can get a few privileges; music, braille books, stuff like that."

I thought over what he said, and decided to try it. I became a model prisoner, and got rewarded with the trivial pleasures I'd have sneered at in my sighted, free days back on Earth. They let me go to a place called the Music Room, where we could sit around and hear recorded concerts. They let me take Braille lessons, and borrow books from the pris-

on's Braille library. I joined a crafts class and learned to make stupid objects out of leather and beads and clay and wood. They paid us a few pennies for everything we made, and the money we earned could be used to buy cigarettes, candy, little inconsequential things that suddenly meant a lot to all of us.

I might have gone on like that for the rest of my natural life, a lump of will-less protoplasm, grateful for small favors and childish comforts, if something hadn't happened to snap me out of this goody-goody mood.

There was a guard named Holborn, a gravel-voiced, heavy-handed guy that the prisoners nicknamed Hands. He was universally hated and feared on the Moon Chute; he had all the hateful instincts of the crazed mob that had burned my parents when I was a child. I don't know how he ever got the job; the prison authorities prided themselves on the good treatment of good prisoners. The answer was simple, of course. Hands could torment the inmates to his heart's desire, and the odd code of behavior self-imposed by the prisoners protected him. They never talked.

The first day I met Hands,

I found out the meaning of his nickname. I felt two sharp blows on my shoulders, and realized that a man's heavy hands were on me as I bent over the worktable in the crafts room. The fingers started to knead my flesh, painfully, and I leaped to my feet with a curse. I heard his voice for the first time, saying:

"Take it easy, buster, take it easy. I just wanted to be friendly."

"Keep your hands to yourself," I shouted. "Or—"

"Or what, blindey?" He laughed loudly, amused by defiance. "You don't know who I am, pal. I'm Holborn. I'm the new guard."

"I don't care who the hell you are—"

I was smacked, hard, across the cheek. I flailed out with my fist and swung at the air. I heard him laugh again, and a hammer-blow struck me at the back of my neck. I fell to the floor, and he helped me up.

"Now take it easy, buster," he said. "I don't want to hurt you. This is a new assignment for me, see, and I don't want trouble. Understand?"

I didn't answer him. Later that night, in my cell, I asked Danny about him.

"Tough break for us," Dan-

ny said darkly. "Hands was always assigned to the isolation cells. He probably got in a few licks at you when you were down there. But now he's upstairs, and that's bad."

"What's wrong with him?"

"He hates Readers," Danny said. "Even if we ain't Readers no more, Hands has still got it in for us. Best thing is to keep out of his way. If he pushes you around a little, don't say anything. It's all we can do."

I felt the fury coming on me again. But I didn't say anything to Danny. I flopped on my bunk and went to sleep.

In a few days, I knew that I couldn't follow Danny's good advice. Hands had never forgotten my first show of defiance in the crafts room, and he had picked me out as a special target of his bias. No day passed without the constant threat of his big, ham-like hands touching me; I shuffled around the prison corridors with an unabated sense of dread. Sometimes it would be nothing more than a pseudo-friendly pinch on my arm. Other times, it would be a staggering blow on the back, coming out of the darkness to startle me and make me grope frantically for the support of a railing.

I took Hands' special treatment for almost a month without complaint, but I knew my nerves couldn't hold out much longer. So I made a plan.

The first thing I did was listen. It was almost all I could do; listen and feel and try to use my remaining senses to get my revenge. I listened hard, and I listened good. I got familiar with every sound of the man. I learned to recognize his lightest footstep, his heavy breathing, his smallest, sound-creating gesture. I got so expert at it that I could recognize his approach ten feet away. For a while, my increased hearing sense enabled me to avoid contact with the guard, or at least be prepared for the onslaught of his punishing hands. But I wanted more than that.

One day, my self-education paid off.

I was in the music room, listening to a Beethoven recording, feeling the strength and power and sublimation that music could impart. I knew I was alone, that the other privileged prisoners had gone off to an audial entertainment provided by the authorities. But I wanted to hear the music; I had a hunger for music that was amounting almost to a passion.

The third movement was

just coming to a close when I heard the sound in the room. I knew it was Hands; the familiar shuffle of his heavy feet was muffled, but I knew. He was sneaking up behind me, a smile probably playing on his face, all set to surprise me with some startling blow. But I wouldn't be surprised this time. I sat there and waited—ready.

Then his arm was sliding around my throat, in the start of a hammer-lock, the beginning of a playful game where I would be half-choked to death. But the game had new rules now, rules I had invented myself. When his sleeve touched my throat, I whirled and caught his arm in mine. The timing was perfect; he was in exactly the position I had deducted. In another second, I had him in a full-nelson, too stunned to even cry out. I held on with all the animal strength I had, feeling his muscles straining against me, taking pleasure in the pain I was causing him.

"Leggo!" he rasped finally. "Leggo, you dirty blindy—"

"Say *sir*, buster," I told him gleefully. "Show some respect for your betters—"

"Leggo or I'll kill ya! So help me, Jugg, I'll—"

"I put more pressure on the back of his neck. I didn't know

what I wanted to do next; I hadn't planned any further than this one pleasureable moment. If I let him go he'd surely make good his promise; I couldn't hope for a moment of ease afterwards.

"I'll kill ya!" he shrieked again. "You blind rat! I'll break your head for ya!"

For a moment, even in my dominant position, I felt panic. There was nothing I could do now, short of ending the threat of Hands for good. It was my only course, the only action that could bring me peace from this tormentor. I applied more pressure still, until I could hear the scrape of his bones inside his flesh. I knew that I had to kill him. I put all my strength into my forearms. There was a dull crack, and Hands went limp in my arms.

I let him drop to the floor. By this time, the guard's yells had produced running feet in the corridor outside.

Hands was dead, and I was heading back to the Hell of solitary.

If anything, my ordeal in the bowels of the Moon Chute was worse the second time. I don't know how many months I lingered there, battering my worn body against the tiny confines of the stone

cell. But I know it was long enough for me to become as whining and craven as the other victim of the hole.

Until I wanted only one thing. Death. I didn't have the courage to batter my head against the stones, but an accident brought me a means to my own end. A guard brought me my meal on a tough plastic dish that had somehow become cracked. With a little effort, I found I could break it in two. The jagged edge would serve me well.

I touched the edge to my wrist, feeling for the vein that would sever life. The dish was transparent, and it glistened like a jewel in my hand.

At first, the phenomenon of light had no effect on me. I was so imbued with thoughts of suicide that nothing else mattered. Then, slowly, the realization came. I had *seen* the dish glistening.

I held it to my eyes again, but saw nothing. I almost decided that it was a trick of my brain, a delusion granted to me just before death. Then, on lowering the dish to the ground, I saw light flash again—a tiny pinpoint, true—but it might well have been the corona of the sun.

Hope filled my whole body. I rubbed my eyes in disbelief. Would I be able to know light

again? I didn't think of actually *seeing*—there was no hope in me for that. But just to know *light*!

I stared at the dish until my head throbbed, staring at the faint glister. Then I roved over the cell, seeking for other pinpoints of light. I found nothing.

I stared and stared at the dish, until I fell asleep.

When I opened my eyes again, my sight had returned. Not just light. Everything. The dish, the dank cell, the barred window of my cell, my own hands and feet and body—everything.

I could see again. I didn't know how or why. But I could see.

The first thing my sighted eyes did was cry.

It was the most difficult chore of my life, fighting the urge to scream my discovery to the world. But I fought it. I knew I *had* to fight it, or I would lose the precious thing which had been willed to me again. If the authorities knew I had the powers of a Reader once more, they would rectify the error quickly. It had to be a secret—my own secret!

Later that day (or was it night?) the guard came into my cell to refill the water pitcher. He was a stout,



phlegmatic man, far different from the man I had imagined in my blinded brain. I sat in a corner of the cell, staring straight ahead, giving no indication of my new-found sight. But I was probing into his brain, gingerly, anxiously, seeking for information that would help me. There was nothing, nothing but loathsome thoughts of physical and carnal hunger in the man's cesspool of a mind. I decided to prompt him.

"I heard a ship," I said.

He whirled. It was the first time I had spoken to him in anything but angry tones.

"What ship?" he said gruffly. "You ain't heard no ship today. You musta been dreaming."

"No, I could have sworn I heard a ship. I heard the rockets blasting for landing."

"You're nuts," he said contemptuously.

I reached back into his mind, probing for an effect of my words upon his thoughts. I Read disconnected impressions, concerning the prison supply ship that shuttled back and forth between Earth and the Moon Chute, impressions about the articles of comfort and pleasure it would bring, impressions about new prisoners. I had to find a more definite answer.

"When does it arrive?" I said. "The next supply ship?"

He laughed. "What the hell's the difference? You ain't booked passage."

I probed sharply into his brain.

*Lunar 9*, he was thinking.

*Lunar 9.*

The ninth day of the Lunar month. I had my answer!

"What's the date?" I said, as he started to leave. "What's the date today?"

"Say, you're full of questions, ain't you?" He chuckled. "I wouldn't worry about dates, pal. You ain't making any appointments."

I probed, and Read my answer.

*Lunar 4. Lunar 4.*

He slammed the great cell door shut, leaving me to a darkness even my new-found eyes couldn't dispell. But it wasn't the same; it didn't fill me with the accustomed horror. I knew that sight was mine, and that my powers had been restored.

And I knew that a ship would be here in five days. Five days to plan my escape!

I picked up the broken plastic dish, and started to scratch a rude calendar on the stone wall.

I was awake all through my normal sleeping hours,

carefully working out the plan.

In the morning, when the first meal was brought to me, I put it into action. Calmly, I told the phlegmatic-faced guard that I had important information to impart to the Moon Chute warden. He merely sneered at first, but I kept probing his mind until I found the deep and intricate sources of his doubts and fears. I used my findings well. I told him that I had information concerning a prison-break, and that if he failed to allow me to report them to the warden, he would be held responsible.

He continued to scoff at my request, but later in the day, he returned to my cell with the head guard of the isolation cells behind him.

"All right, Jugg," his superior said roughly. "What's all this about a break?"

"I'll only talk to the warden," I said defiantly. "But you better let me see him, or there'll be trouble."

They exchanged worried looks. Could they take the chance of ignoring me?

I had figured them right.

"All right," the head guard said. "On your feet."

I allowed them to lead me out of the cell and down the corridors. The prison's bowels were as dank and dreary in

actuality as my blinded brain had imagined them.

The Warden's office was a comfortable large room, lined with oak paneling. The Warden himself was a gruff, bald-headed man with sharp features and a worried frown. He let them seat me in a chair next to his desk, and I stared distantly over the top of his head while I spoke.

I don't know exactly what I told him. It made little sense. But I was more concerned in what the Warden's brain was telling me. As I rambled on about overhearing a fictitious conversation involving a prison break, his mind was working. I learned that my guard had been correct, that a supply vessel was due to land on Lunar 9, and scheduled to depart the same day. I learned the name of the ship's pilot, the number of the ship's crew, the details concerning the supplies he was bringing to the prison. I learned an amazing book of facts concerning the trip, and I knew that I could use these facts to advantage.

When my tale had been told, the Warden's lip curled and he said:

"This man is unbalanced. Take him back to isolation."

"Wait a minute—" I protested.

But the guards were already yanking me from the chair, and dragging me out of the panelled office to the corridors. I didn't care; I had learned what I wanted to know.

Each day I scratched off a period of hours on my wall calendar, and each day I polished my plan for escape.

On the ninth day of the lunar month, I heard the muffled roar of a descending rocket ship, and knew that the moment had come.

When my guard came in, bearing the midday meal, I waited until his back was turned.

Then I threw myself upon him, covering any outcry he could make with one hand, while my other whipped his arm behind his back. I could hear his muffled gasp of surprise; then I slammed the hard edge of my palm across his neck. I didn't know if the blow killed him, but he lost consciousness and dropped to the stone floor.

Swiftly, I made the exchange of clothing. It was a bad fit; he was too short and stout; but it would have to do.

I dragged his body, now in prisoner's uniform, to my bunk. I draped a blanket across him, and left the cell.

The corridor that led to the head guard's quarters, adjacent to the elevator that would take me to the upper section of the Moon Chute, was long and circuitous.

I rapped boldly on the head guard's door, and pushed it open.

He was sitting at a desk, huddled over a report sheet. There was a pistol in the holster draped over the back of the chair.

"What is it?" he said in annoyance, and turned around.

It was easy to beat him to possession of the weapon. I held the pistol in an unwavering grip, the muzzle hard against the third button of his uniform. I said:

"The elevator. How does it work?"

"You can see!" he stared at me, stared at the red "R" on my forehead, now glowing with the feverish intensity of my design.

"I can see," I snarled. "And I can Read, too. So don't waste my time, jailer. How does the elevator work?"

"It doesn't," he said, his voice trembling. "You have to contact the guard on the second level. He's the only one that can set the mechanism—"

I probed his mind, and found he was speaking the truth.

"All right," I snapped. "Call the second level and tell them to start it up. And watch what you say, jailer; I wouldn't hesitate to use this gun. You don't have to read my mind to know that."

He looked in my eyes and knew I meant it. Then he used a desk intercom to contact the upper level of the Moon Chute.

"One more thing," I said with a smile, measuring his taller, slimmer body with my eyes. "The uniform."

It was a far better fit.

"Goodbye, jailer," I said, and turned the gun in my hand. It was a good feeling, bringing the solid butt down on his head. There was blood matting his hair when I left the office.

I stepped off the elevator on the second level and went briskly towards the first guard on the floor. He watched my approach curiously.

I smiled and came up to his side. He said: "Who are you?"

"A friend," I answered, drawing the pistol from the holster. "But an enemy if you don't do what I say. One word and I will kill you."

His eyes widened with fear and surprise.

"I want you to take me to the airlock. To the supply ship that just came in."

He was staring at the "R" on my forehead.

"That's right," I laughed softly. "I can Read you, friend. I can Read every thought in that head of yours. So don't try any tricks. Just lead me to the airlock, and you'll be all right."

The rest was easy; astonishingly easy. The precautions against break-out in the Moon Chute were few; they had banked too much on the blind eyes of the prisoners; they had thought Darkness was their best protection. I pulled the guard's cap well over my brow as we entered the airlock that led to the supply ship. The pilot and two crew-members, awaiting their orders from the Warden, weren't surprised when we entered the vessel. But a moment later, they were surprised. I lifted the pistol to belt-level, and told them what they had to do. They didn't argue.

Fifteen minutes later, the supply ship fired rockets, and we were heading back to Earth.

I kept probing the brains of my captives, making certain there would be no betrayal. I felt exhilarated, excited, hopeful of the future for the first time in over two years.

There was one more step

that had to be taken to make my mission successful. By this time, news of my escape would have been radioed to Earth, and there would be a welcoming committee on the lookout for the arrival of the moon vessel. But I knew a way to foil that procedure, too.

We were only three hours from Earth's orbital pull, when I did what I had to do.

I readied the moon ship's emergency escape-sled, and fired the pistol at the ship's reactor control. The crew shrieked in horror and fear at what I had done, and made a rush towards me. I fired and wounded one of them, and the others backed away.

Then I crawled into the space-sled, and pulled the firing mechanism.

I was six thousand miles away from the supply ship when it blew up. But I was safe, and heading back for Earth.

I spent three months in Venezuela, a month in St. Thomas, three weeks in Mexico City. It was easy for me to put a bankroll together; I had plenty of experience.

I couldn't get the horror of the past two years out of my mind, but there was one aspect of the nightmare that still worried and puzzled me.

I had to find the answer, and only one man could supply it.

I went to see him.

He didn't recognize me when I called at his office, a felt hat pushed down over my brow, a coat collar covering half my face.

"Hello, doctor," I said.

"I'm afraid I don't—"

"Jugg's the name." I took the pistol from my pocket, but didn't point it at the old man; it was strictly a precaution. Then I lifted off my hat.

He stared at me wordlessly for a while. Then, his voice a harsh whisper, he said:

"Jugg. I had heard of your escape. I was—glad."

I laughed.

"You don't believe," Wardell said mournfully. "And yet—you can always learn the truth. My mind is open to you, Jugg."

I accepted the invitation, and probed.

He was telling the truth. He was glad.

"What happened to me?" I said. "I was blind for almost two years, and then I wasn't blind. What happened to me, doctor?"

He didn't answer me, not with words. But I kept the probe searching his brain, and I knew.

Wardell hadn't performed

the operation as scheduled. Instead of destroying the optic nerves that would have taken away my sight, he had merely paralyzed them. In two years, the paralysis had disappeared, and normal vision had returned.

But it hadn't been a surgical error. It had been deliberate.

"But why?" I said, looking baffled. "Why did you do it?"

"I don't know." He bowed his head wearily. "I had many opportunities to do the same before. But somehow, the sight of you, Jugg, the sight of the boy I knew as a child—a brave, bitter child—I couldn't take away your sight."

He said nothing more, but I continued to probe.

"There's more to it than that," I said. "I can see it in your mind, doctor. There's something else."

"No, nothing else—"

"There is! I can Read it, doctor. I can read—*Guilt*."

He looked up, his eyes startled.

"No! Nothing else!"

"Tell me about it, Doctor Wardell. I can Read for myself, you know. Tell me about it."

He shut his eyes, as if the action would block my probing

brain. Then he opened them again, and said:

"All right, Jugg. I'll tell you."

He walked to the window, and didn't face me as he spoke.

"It started some twenty years ago," he said, in a flat, lifeless voice. "During the height of the Reader persecutions. There were high-level government meetings held constantly, trying to decide what formal action should be taken. There was much debate over the issue, the most important issue facing mankind at the moment.

"The problem was simple. The Readers were a threat to the human race, a threat to all those who had normal mental powers. The hate that engulfed the Readers was shared by the governments of Earth, and yet they couldn't express that hate without criticism. They, too, wanted the Readers destroyed—but they had no legal or morally acceptable ideas as to how that destruction could be accomplished.

"And then the Idea was born. What if the Readers were criminals? What if they were enemies of society? What if they committed heinous crimes? Surely, then, society would be justified in tracking them down and removing the source of their power. It was

a great and simple Idea. The Readers had to become Criminals—so that the world would have *reason* for their hate and fear—reason to blind and imprison them where they could move among normal men no longer.

"And that was the Plan, a Plan officially instituted almost twenty years ago."

I stared at him.

"What are you talking about? How could they make criminals out of the Readers?"

"It wasn't difficult, once the goal had been set. There is a certain chemical compound, a formulation which acts in deadly fashion upon certain tissues in the brain. Once injected into the blood stream, this compound does its evil work upon the consciousness, impairing the functions of the brain, those factors which allow men to decide the difference between right and wrong. It destroys the very core of conscience. It permits a man to commit violence and unholy deeds without the pangs of doubt and fear. It makes men into animals, caring nothing for the pain or death of others. It obliterates mercy."

I sat down.

"It's a terrible thing," Dr. Wardell said. "And I was a party to it. I was one of the medical men who worked with

the government on the project, and it was partly my own work in the anti-bacterial field which permitted the Plan to succeed. It was I who suggested that the chemical compound could be incorporated easily into the anti-bacterial injections given every infant and child—the injections which are supposed to protect against disease germs. Through my work, these injections became something else to the Readers—they became the poison which rotted their minds, turned them into monsters."

He looked around, and his eyes met mine.

"I made you what you are, Jugg. You are my creation. Your crimes, your murders are on my soul."

"We have to stop it," I said.

"It's too late . . ."

"NO! For this generation, perhaps. But not for the next."

"I'm tired," Wardell said. "I'm an old man."

"But I'm not. I'll tell them, Doctor. If I have to spend the rest of my life doing it—"

He came up to me, and put his veined hand on my shoulder. His voice was fervent.

"Yes!" he said. "Tell them, Jugg! Tell them all! Stop this horror before it's too late!"

"I will," I promised.

And I will. I will. I will!

**THE END**

# SIN PLANET

By MACK REYNOLDS

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

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*A friend of ours, Bill Hamling, edits a magazine called Rogue. This somewhat irreverent book has been called The Poor Man's Esquire and Mack Reynolds roams the world as its correspondent, reporting back as to what interesting varieties of sin are favored in various world-cities. Recently, he took the wrong plane and landed on Ennui, an out-of-the-way planet Rogue wasn't interested in. But AMAZING STORIES was, so herewith is a report of sin on Ennui. Heavens to Betsy, what a place!*

---

WHEN the spaceport reef-er units had cooled ship and tarmac the ladder snaked out, the sole passenger destined for this stop worked his way down, a single bag in his hand. He strode with moderate haste to the nearest shield and stood looking back at the craft that had been home for some weeks. Auto-longshores on their whirling treads scampered about and in a matter of moments the ship had deposited cargo, took on cargo, and then began again its fulminations against gravity, finally shaking the tentacles of inertia from its should-have-been immovable bulk.

It disappeared into the nothingness above and Jeff Archer made with a shrug which was at the same time a stretching of muscles and

picked up his bag. The *Sirian Clipper* had been roomy enough, her air being somewhat superior to nature's own, but there was still a feeling of constriction gone.

There was no welcoming committee. In fact, there was no one at all other than the technician in the control tower who gave him a wave as Jeff passed on his way to the administration building. He had not expected a "steamboat round the bend" reception but there were usually a few sightseers about when a Clipper landed.

The glass portals of the administration building opened before him, closed behind him. On the far side of the expanse of tile was a mildly gaudy TE sign blinking its letters in





It was late. The boys had to hurry.

rainbow neon. Archer made his way in that direction.

Inside, the door having closed quietly after him, he put down the bag and looked over the counter.

"Hey," he said, without either volume or impatience. He had a whole week to kill.

The other wore the standard Terran Express uniform down to the faint whiff of *Wanderlust* perfume. But right now his eyes were closed and his stockinged feet tucked into a drawer of the desk.

He growled softly, opened his left eye, closed it and began to mutter something. He shot open both eyes, his chin dropped and he caught himself before his chair took him over backward.

"Holy smokes, a *tourist*!"

He scrambled erect, his face shining welcome. He sat down again, his face still shining welcome and began slipping into his shoes whilst demanding, "Where in the hell did you come . . . ?" He caught that and said, "I'm sorry, sir, but I received no advance notice of your arrival."

Jeff leaned on the counter. "I didn't know until yesterday I'd stop. Got a spacegram from the home office. Had some time to kill anyway, might as well do it here."

"You don't kill time on En-

nui," the other muttered, finishing with his shoes. "It dies a slow death of age here." He held out a hand to be shaken. "I'm Freddi Braun, Ennui agent of Terra Express."

"Jefferson Archer, just Jeff," Jeff said. "I suppose you can make reservations for me?"

"All the standard TE services, including an auto-hotel right here in the building."

"I doubt if I'll be staying in this town. I'm not exactly a tourist. We might as well get this straight, I'm looking for the local sin-city."

The tourist agent blinked three times.

"Sin-city, *sin-city*," Jeff said. "I'm from Interplanetary Mag Writers. Classified Hack Fourth Class, Division X. That's men's magazines. My sub-classification is sin-cities."

Freddi asked cautiously, "What's a sin-city?"

Jeff Archer sometimes got impatient at this point. His father and grandfather had both ranked Third Class, Sports. He'd never made that grade. He said, "You know. Wine, women, and song, wide-open town, narcotics, political corruption, vice of all sorts. Every planet has at least one sin-city. Jerks back on Earth

with soft jobs in department stores and such sit around in the evenings and read my articles and drool."

The other was shaking his head. He'd started shaking it almost from the beginning of the description. By its end he was shaking it *regretfully*. "Not on Ennui," he said. "There is no sin-city on Ennui."

Archer said, "That's what you think. If there isn't one I stretch a point here and there and *make* one. Come on, let's go get a cup of coffee and talk about it. You don't look pushed with business."

The tourist agent ducked under the counter to join him, muttering, nostalgia in his voice, "*Coffee!* I remember."

He led the way out a back door of the spaceport building after showing Archer a place to stow his bag. He calmed the other's hesitation with, "There hasn't been even a petty crime on Ennui for five years, not to speak of anything as exciting as pilferage."

The street was on the drab side, across it a small bar and grill, not different from every bar and grill across from every spaceport, airport, train or bus station down through the ages.

The place was empty except

for the bartender who wore the white apron uniform of the IT monopoly including a faintest touch of *Prost!* perfume. "Hi, Freddi," he said, eyeing Archer with unfeigned interest. "Shucks, if I'd known anybody was going to be on the Clipper I'd been there to meet it."

Freddi made introductions before choosing a table. "Jeff Archer, meet Jack Casey. Couple of concentrates," he ordered. "Hot or cold, Mr. Archer?"

"Jeff," Jeff said. "Concentrate! You mean that sour-lemonade stuff? Coffee for me."

"Yeah," Freddi said. He and the bartender sighed, the sweetness of nostalgia again in the air. "Jeff, this is a D-Classification planet and one ounce of dehydrated coffee will make fifteen cups while one ounce of concentrate makes a thousand."

Archer screwed up his face. There were a dozen questions to ask already, but some of them could wait. He said, while the bartender was drawing the water, "What's the spaceport doing way out here? Usually it's on the edge of the capital city."

"Ennui is the capital city," Freddi told him.

"Oh. Well, where's the population center? Where are the big resorts?"

Casey was bringing their drinks. He said sadly, "This is the population center." Suddenly his eyes went to the clock. "Jumpinjets, Freddi, this stranger coming along made me forget. It's almost ten o'clock."

"Ten o'clock?" the tourist agent said blankly.

"It's the first Friday in June." The bartender was scrambling back to his post, hurrying small glasses onto the bar.

"Holy smokes," Freddi gasped. "Come on, Jeff!" He scampered to his feet.

Men began pouring into the tiny bar. Fifteen or twenty of them, Jeff Archer estimated. They lined up impatiently, each behind one of the glasses. Freddi Braun made hurried introductions. "Boys, this is Jeff Archer. Hack writer going to do some articles about Eunnui."

Some of them hurried some kind of a hello, but most of them muttered, their hand held within an inch or so of their respective half-sized shot glasses.

"What'll it be this time, gents?" Casey said, his voice tense.

"*Woji*," they chorused, evidently having decided upon that answer beforehand.

Jeff Archer wasn't sure he wanted any of the fiery Martian absinthe this early in the day but he held his peace. All this probably came under the head of local color and he might be able to use it. Local color a writer needed, even for sin-city pieces.

The clock chimed and the bartender began pouring as fast as he could go down the line. As quickly as a glass was filled it was downed, without chaser, and the glass replaced until Casey came by again. He had it down, Archer had to admit, to a fine, fast art. Jeff had never seen a man pour so rapidly and accurately in his life. Not a drop spilled, not a motion wasted. He tore up and down past the eighteen or twenty glasses filling them almost as rapidly as they were polished off.

Jeff Archer murmured, "What the hell," under his breath and drank along with the rest. He'd never seen such bolting of liquid dynamite in his life. But he could find out just what was happening later.

The clock chimed again, Casey stopped his pouring, everybody relaxed. One of the newcomers said happily, "By

golly, I got four this time. That's the best I ever did."

Another said, a hint of the *woji* blurring his voice, "Casey is getting faster."

Casey said modestly, "I been practicing with a bottle of water. You boys can depend on Interplanetary Taverns giving you the best service possible."

Now that the tension was over the men crowded around the planet's most recent addition, all of them with a few words to say before making their apologies and heading back for their jobs.

When they had gone Jeff Archer and the tourist agent took their table again. Archer cleared his throat and said, "What just happened?"

Freddi was pleased with himself having got three *wojis* of his own and a fourth that Archer had donated to him. Jeff Archer didn't like to drink fast, not *that* fast.

Freddi said, "I told you Ennui was D-Classification. In fact, it's D-Clasification . . ."

Jeff muttered, "I didn't know you could get below 'C'."

"Sub-division Four. Practically no freighters stop off here and even when they do merchants aren't interested in shipments involving such small orders."

"But what happened just then?" Archer insisted.

"Don't you get it? There's no prohibition on Ennui but we have such shortages that our liquor regulations have to be, well, stringent."

"Stringent?"

Casey took over the explanation as he washed the glasses. "On the first Friday of each month, starting at ten o'clock, for two full minutes, you're allowed to buy alcoholic drinks on Ennui. There are some other qualifications, too. It's for sale only over this bar and no glass can hold more than one-third of an ounce."

Jeff Archer was taken aback. "We can't buy a drink for the rest of the month? You can't be serious?"

That was right.

"Well, then, why weren't there more men here? I'd think the whole population of the planet would . . ."

"It was," Freddi said. "Except for two or three who don't drink."

Archer relaxed in his chair, slumped would be the better word. "Let me get this. You mean there are less than thirty men on this planet?"

"Twenty-three, including you," Freddi said.

"But look . . ." He had a hundred questions. Finally settled for, "What are you do-

ing here?" He looked at Casey. "And *you*?"

That was easy. Freddi said, "If Terran Express wants to keep its interplanetary monopoly franchise it's got to have an office and representative on every populated planet." He nodded at Casey. "And the same applies to Interplanetary Taverns. They've got to have a properly staffed bar on every planet or they lose *their* franchise."

Indignation was beginning to well in the writer. "But the guide book said this planet was the richest gem center in the galaxy. Just in rubies alone..."

Freddi said gently, "It's been a long time since mining was done with pick and shovel, Jeff. Here we've got automation raised to its zenith. People are just not necessary."

Archer felt desperate. He turned to Casey. "But look, this law about liquor only two minutes a month. Who's to stop you serving it, well, say, three minutes?"

There was a reserved dignity in the bartender's answer. "See here, Archer, we got *laws* on Ennui."

The writer was holding his hands out, palms upward. "Sure, but, well, who *enforces*

them. It seems to me that you fellows could..."

A metallic voice cut in with a warning, a voice that seemingly came from the walls. "Subversive discussion is a misdemeanor. Article 4, Section B. Ennui criminal code. This is a first warning. Repetition involves prosecution."

Casey said, "We got automation like it's never been no place else."

Jeff Archer suddenly felt the need for fresh air. "Come on," he said to Freddi Braun. "Let's get out of here." Followed by the tourist guide he made for the street.

"See you gents later," Casey said in the tone of his calling.

They strolled up the street, the tourist agent pointing out the town's sights with a professional line of chatter. "And here to our left," he was saying happily, "we have the sapphire plant. Once a month a human mechanic checks the non-human mechanics, otherwise it is fully automatic." He broke off to look shyly at the other and to say, "You know, this is the first time I've ever had the opportunity to give a bona-fide tourist the conducted tour of Ennui."

"I'm not a tourist," Archer growled, and then with all but anguish in his voice. "Look here, Braun, you're young and

you look fairly smart. Why don't you *leave*?"

Freddi Braun looked at him, taken aback. "I work for TE," he said. "I've got seven years in with them. If I quit, they would be wasted. My career . . ."

"Then Casey," Archer insisted, "and all those other men . . ."

"In the same boat. They've had the hard luck of being assigned to Ennui for a few years. If they flunk out they lose seniority or possibly even their jobs." He hesitated before an auto-dispenser, put a coin in it. A cigarette rolled out.

Archer said, "You buy your cigarettes one at a time, Freddi? Lots of trouble, isn't it?"

Freddi chuckled bitterly, brought a small pair of scissors from his pocket, cut the cigarette into four pieces, then carefully stashed three of them away in a miniature cigarette case. The fourth piece he inserted in a clever holder which obviously allowed the smoker to consume butt and all.

"My weekly allotment," he said, lighting up. "Lady nicotine is on the scarce side, too, but . . ." In the middle of his sentence he stopped short, a worshipful expression spread

over his face and he grabbed the neat TE cap from his head.

Archer stopped, too, aghast.

Walking toward them from down the street was a gangling female, colorless of face, tight of mouth. Her clothes . . . but Jeff Archer decided to ignore her clothes. Either they were impossible to obtain on Ennui or she had the worst taste he had ever heard about.

As she passed, without a nod, Freddi said huskily, "Hi, Goldie." For a long moment he looked after her until she disappeared into the doorway of the street's most elaborate bungalow.

Archer said, "Holy cow, what was that?"

"That was Goldie."

"So I gathered. Who's Goldie?"

"Ennui's womenfolks."

Archer turned again and looked down the street in the direction in which she had disappeared. "Are you kidding?"

The tourist guide in Braun reasserted itself. "Goldie was a stowaway. The first and only woman ever to set foot on Ennui. I suppose she owns half the planet."

"Half the planet!"

The other sighed deeply. "Among other things, Goldie

charges twenty credits a word to talk to a man."

"Did - you - say - twenty - credits-a-word?"

"That's right," Freddi sighed. "Another two weeks and I'll have enough to . . ."

"That old-bag . . . ?"

Braun drew himself up stiffly. "See here, sir. You might be a TE customer but you're speaking about the woman I love."

"Love!"

"Me and everybody else on Ennui," Braun said. "She's the only woman on the planet remember."

"But, well, how did she get half the property on . . ."

"Oh, that. For a while Goldie worked in Casey's Bar. Made enough on tips in the first week to start her investments. Pay's high on Ennui, you know—for obvious reasons—and nothing to spend it on." He sighed again. "Mostly we spend it on Goldie."

They'd reached the end of the street, now they started back. At the spaceport administration building Braun helped the other with his bag, conducted him to the Presidential Suite of the auto-hotel.

The writer had been quiet for a long time. Now he turned to his companion. "You characters must be crazy, let-

ting yourselves be marooned on this nut-house planet. Believe me when that Clipper sets down next week I'm going to be out on the tarmac waiting for it."

"Next week?" Braun said blankly. "You mean next year."

"Now I know you're around the bend! My firm sent me here for one week and that'll be plenty!"

Freddi attempted consolation. "Sorry, Jeff, somebody goofed-it for you. The spaceship comes just once a year. That's one reason for all the shortages."

The writer was suddenly weak. "A year!"

"That's right. But look," the tourist agent told him soothingly, "it's not as bad as all that—not for you. Look at me. I'm a tourist agent with no tourists. Casey is a bartender without liquor to sell. At least you're a writer. This planet is a natural. It's practically one big gem. What a story! And some of the animal life is amazing."

"I'm a Division X," Archer snapped. "Not a damned Division K, zoölogist."

Freddi shrugged it away, looked at his watch. "Well, I suppose you'll want to unpack. I'll see you later at the mess hall. We all eat at the commu-



nity house." He grimaced, "Class D, hydroponics and concentrates."

After he'd left Jeff Archer scowled. "Animal life, gems! What's the guy trying to do, get me to louse up my union standing writing out of my classification?"

He opened his suitcase, dug around for a moment finally coming up with an Electronityper. He growled under his breath, "Might as well get the first story off. If I'm going to be here a year I'll have to take the place from every angle if I'm ever going to make my article a month quota."

He sat himself down in a pneumato-chair and began dictating into the typewriter.

"Title," he said, "*Ennui, Sin-Planet Supreme, space, by, space, Jefferson Archer, space, paragraph.*

*"Sin-racked city in its cess-*

*pool section of space is tiny Ennui, happily largely unknown to the average reader of this magazine. Happily, we say, since the degree of iniquity here is all but unbelievable. Paragraph.*

*"For instance, fiery woji is openly sold in Casey's Bar right on the principal street of the principal city. And so depraved are the employees of the gigantic gem plants that they leave their posts en masse even at ten o'clock in the morning in order to indulge in glass after glass of the potent beverage. Paragraph.*

*"A certain narcotic, which I shall leave unnamed, is available in slot machines on city streets of Ennui, nor were we surprised, strolling along at mid-day to spot a painted woman. . . .*

**THE END**

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## **An Announcement To Members Of The Space Club—**

The Space Club has been discontinued. However, we invite all interested readers to pick up a copy of the April *Fantastic*, on sale March 20th, which will feature a meeting place for those who enjoy forming friendships through correspondence.

We sincerely regret the inconvenience brought upon readers who have applied for listing in the Space Club and will contact each applicant individually.

# THE CREATORS

By O. H. LESLIE

ILLUSTRATOR MARTINEZ

DAMON didn't want to leave, not just yet. On the day the starship was scheduled to leave the planet Vexa, he roamed the spongy umber foothills in the eerie perpetual twilight, looking for new botanical specimens among the ragged, tangled growths. But the other members of the expedition, watching from the ship, knew that it was something else about the planet which made Damon want to delay their departure. It was a mystery they had all experienced from the moment of landfall, an elusive magic in the atmosphere of the strange, moody world, billions of miles from Earth. A strange and compelling attraction.

"Captain Damon, sir," Ivers, the young navigation officer, spoke respectfully into

*This is a "what if—" story. We know the speed of light is 186,000 miles per second. This is—at least theoretically—the top-velocity of all movement. So, what if a space ship achieved this speed? What would happen? With time and space so delicately balanced in the cosmic scheme, the results could be startling.*

the communicator. "The men were wondering, sir—"

The distant figure straightened up guiltily. "All right, Rick, Start the controls check. I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Yes, sir."

The three crewmen in the ship looked at each other without comment, and set about the task of checking the complex controls of the *Genesee*, in preparation for the months-long journey back.

They had left Earth almost six months ago, as one of a thousand routine investigatory flights to the Andromeda system, to provide Earth's Central Interstellar Bureau with all the basic statistics concerning the planet Vexa. They had done their job well, and now they could return.



Unaware of their role in cosmic history, they carefully loaded the treasure.

There would be no fanfare or parades to welcome them; such flights had become too commonplace. But in each of the four hearts within the skin-tight space rigs beat a special hope—a hope that their discovery of an unknown mineral would bring them extraordinary rewards.

It was Ivers who had made the discovery. When he located the odd, rust-colored ore that was plentiful on the planet, his examination produced surprise on his young, almost beardless face.

"Maybe I'm seeing things, Captain. But there's an element here I never heard of before."

Damon had personally double-checked the findings, and the excitement spread over his normally wooden face.

By God, it's true. It's that X mineral they're always talking about, that alien element that wouldn't have any counterpart on Earth—"

London, the ship's math expert, snickered. He was a squat, burly man, who hid his Oxford education under a gruff New York accent. "That is a fairy tale, Captain," he said. "That's an old space myth. There just ain't no new minerals in the universe. Just good old iron, nickel, copper, zinc—"

"Then we're crazy, or the instruments are out of whack. But this stuff has a density that exceeds anything I've ever heard of. It's got an atomic weight more than double that of uranium. Just *hold* the damn stuff—"

London had blinked, and taken a small handful of the ore. He exclaimed in surprise when the small nugget dropped his hand to the knee.

"Heavy, ain't it? You'd never think—"

"I tell you it's *new*!" Ivers said enthusiastically. "The most fissionable mineral ever! You realize how *valuable* this stuff could be?"

"Don't get big ideas." Farrell, the lanky engineer, chuckled. "We're not allowed to stake any claims, Rick. All we can do is report the find to the CIB."

"There'll be *something* in it for us, Captain Damon—" He whirled towards the chief officer, his eyes shining. "Could I have permission to set up a refining rig? If I could bring back the pure stuff—"

Damon shook his head. "Can't spare you, Rick. We've got a lot else to do."

"Please, Captain! If we have to take the crude ore, with our weight limitations, I could only take a few pounds."

They had argued, and the captain finally agreed. Within three weeks, almost six thousand pounds of the new material had been brought to a pure state—but the six thousand pounds were contained in a rusty block of metal less than one foot square.

Now they were ready for the return flight, and yet not ready at all. As the long twilighted days passed, the planet's mystic mood had fallen upon them all. They didn't know what accounted for their dreamy state, but still they found it difficult to start the power in the rocket engines that would carry them away.

"Captain Damon," Rick said again into the communicator. "All controls check okay. We're ready any time you say."

They heard his answering sigh. "All right, Rick. I'll be aboard in five minutes."

They saw the spacesuited figure straighten, look around at the gray-blue sky overhead, and walk towards the ship. Damon climbed the narrow ladder, and as the shiny crown of his helmet showed above the entrance, he said:

"Prepare for takeoff."

They stood about the viewport when the ship was in the

electronic hands of the automatic controls, and watched the hazy ball diminish in sight.

Space seemed empty and uninspiring.

"Well, that's that," Damon said. "Now comes the hard part."

They knew what he meant. The return journey would take more than three months. There would be little for them to do except amuse themselves. It would be hard, but they would manage.

"What the hell," London said sharply, looking at Rick Ivers' face. "Are you *crying*, for pete's sake?"

"I can't help it." Ivers jabbed away the tears ferociously. "I don't know what's got into me. But I feel so damn *sad*. Like somebody died—"

Farrell touched his shoulder. "It's okay, kid," he drawled. "I feel pretty rotten, too. Must be something to do with the change of pressure, or something."

"No," Captain Damon said. "It's something else. I've got the feeling something's happened, or going to happen. I can't explain it, either. But it's there."

They looked at each other wonderingly, searching for the answer in their faces. Then London forced himself

to laugh, and said: "I got a great idea. Let's run off an old Chaplin. That'll pull us outa the dumps."

Damon grinned. "Okay. How about *City Lights*?"

They set up the movie equipment, and London flipped on the image. Nobody laughed during the show.

They detected the trouble a day later. It might have occurred sooner, but nobody had thought of checking the controls. Farrell made the report casually.

"Our speed is what?" Damon said.

"Increasing," Farrell answered. "According to the original control settings, we have been picking up velocity."

"The instruments must be off," the captain frowned.

He checked them himself. The difference in the reading was fractional, but it was there. It was disturbing; the ship's servo-mechanism should have kept the reading pinpointed to the original velocity set at takeoff.

"Okay, men," Damon said. "We won't be so bored for the next few days. We're going to check every control and mechanism on the *Genesee*."

London groaned. "But that's work, Captain."

"Do us good."

But the investigation produced no evidence of mechanical failure, and Damon had to reach another conclusion.

"Lieutenant Ivers, your log reports a setting of 144700. The dials are reading 144703. We can't find the fault in the ship, so the error must be yours."

London said: "Just a minute, Captain. Might as well get the record straight. The reading is now 144708."

Damon stared at him. "That's crazy—"

"But it's true. Must be some kind of special phenomenon."

"What kind of phenomenon?" Farrell said. "Never heard of anything like this. And I've been spaceborne since I was a kid."

"I don't know," the captain said. "But it's nothing to get excited about. Not yet."

Two days later, the reading was 144800.

"Let's not worry," Damon said again, loud and forcefully, as if the statement was made to allay his own fears. "The difference is only fractional. We'll just get back sooner, that's all."

London, sitting at the ship's analog computer, rubbed his scalp and scowled. "Maybe too soon," he said. "If my calcula-

tions are right, we're increasing speed by something like .000009 every hour. If you figure the ratio—"

"I said cut it out. There's nothing we can do about it—so let's wait and see."

They waited.

And sixty hours later, the velocity of the starship *Gene-see* had increased by one-third.

They stood about the dials, and Damon said:

"All right, we're in a jam. Let's keep our heads and figure a way out."

"It's Vexa," London said bitterly. "It's that nutty planet's fault. It's got us all bewitched."

"The new mineral," Ivers said, licking his lips. "Maybe it's having an effect on our instruments. How do we know what a highly-fissionable metal could do?"

"You know better," Damon said. "The instruments are inertial; no magnetism could affect the readings. But you may have a thought. Maybe the metal is affecting the ship's engines themselves—"

Farrell made a noise. "Never heard of such a thing."

"Maybe so. But we never heard of such a mineral, either. So let's find out."

Ivers took charge of the study, feeling a personal responsibility for the Vexa metal. His report came three days later, when the ship's velocity had increased one-half.

"Something's happening, all right. But it's got me baffled, Captain. The stuff's increased in radioactivity and density. I can't even tell how much; our instruments aren't that sensitive."

"I say dump the stuff," London growled.

"No!" Ivers almost shouted. "We can't do that. It's the only worthwhile thing we brought back—"

"Let's not get excited," Damon said placatingly. "We will wait a while, and see what happens. If the mineral still gets more active, we'll probably have our villain. Then we won't have any choice *but* to dump it—not if we don't want to plow into the Earth at a million miles per. Then we'll have to get rid of it."

"It can't be the mineral," Ivers said. "It just can't be—"

"You don't want it to be," London sneered. "You think we're gonna be heroes on account of that stuff."

They glared at each other, and the captain said:

"Keep the peace, gentlemen."

We don't know anything for sure."

The next day, they knew for sure.

"Speed's still increasing," Farrell reported. "And at a higher ratio than ever."

"What about the mineral?"

"Getting hotter," Ivers said unhappily. "I guess we don't have any choice."

"Get ready to dump it," Damon said.

The four of them went to the cargo hold, where the foot square block of rusty metal lay in its lead housing. They swung the electromagnetic hoist into position, and guided the contact block over the mineral.

"Look out!" Ivers shouted.

The hoist began to slip, and the chains slid until they blurred before their eyes. The contact block smashed atop the Vexa metal with a clang.

"Did you see that?" Ivers said, staring. "The stuff's got more magnetic power than the hoist. We can't budge it!"

"This baby has built-in gravity," London said. "If you ask me, it's being attracted by something outside this ship. Maybe that's why our speed's increasing. Maybe something is *pulling* this damn hunk of metal towards it!"

"But what?" Farrell said.

"We're eighty million miles from any solid body."

Damon looked thoughtful. "Earth," he said. "Maybe it's the Earth."

They looked at him bewildered.

"It sounds crazy. But I keep having the feeling that this thing is being drawn to the Earth—as if it wants to get there so bad that it's increasing the velocity of the ship."

"We can check that out," Farrell said easily. "Let's just change course for a while. We won't have to worry about making up the time; we're weeks early as it is."

"All right," Damon said. "We'll try it. Let's divert the ship by six vectors. Just as an experiment."

They followed him to the manual control section of the ship. They watched the captain switch off the robot pilot and grasp the levers that would activate the secondary rockets.

They saw his face go white.

"What's happening?" Ivers said.

"Nothing. That's the trouble. Rockets aren't firing. There's no response at all."

"That can't be—"

"It can. The controls are dead. We're not steering this ship any more. Something else is."



London swore. "No hellish metal's going to tell *me* where to go—"

"If we can't change course," Farrell said, "and the velocity keeps going up—"

"We'll crash!" Ivers shouted suddenly, voicing all their fears. "We'll never be able to brake the ship. We won't be able to slow down—"

"It'll be a record," Farrell chuckled. "We might even reach the speed of light. That'll give us the recognition you're so hot for, Rick."

"We've got to dump that mineral," Damon said tensely. "It's our only hope."

"But how? We can't budge it! We can't make it do anything it doesn't want to do—"

"We'll have to try. That's all I can think of. Try."

They tried, and they failed, and the velocity of the *Gene-see* doubled and redoubled again.

Finally, they came to a conclusion.

"The Vexa metal's hotter than ever," Ivers said. "Radioactivity's increased thousands of times. So's the density. It must weigh millions of pounds by now. It's unbelievable—"

"It's more than that," London said angrily. "It's dangerous. This thing has an explosive potential that makes a

thousand cobalt bombs look like a firecracker. If anything ever triggered that stuff—"

"We'd have the biggest damn blowup in history," Farrell said. "We'll be our own super-nova . . ."

Captain Damon walked to the viewport, and stared at the still, unblinking stars that gave no evidence of their incredibly rapid motion.

"It *will* be triggered," he said hollowly. "There's no question about it. If our speed keeps doubling and tripling this way, we'll hit Earth with all the force of an atomic bombardment. The metal will blow—and that'll be the end."

He turned to them.

"Not just the end of us," he finished quietly. "The end of everything. The whole planet. Earth."

They were stunned into silence.

"And there's nothing we can do?" London said, his angry face suddenly reposed, resignation in his voice.

"Only one thing I can think of. Wait until we get into radio range of Earth. Tell them what's happening. Get them to send an intercepting ship."

Ivers put a hand to his trembling lips. He was young, recently married, newly commissioned. He was just begin-

ning to learn how sweet life could be.

"And do what?" he said.

"Fire on the *Genesee*. Destroy the ship, before we wipe out the Earth."

They remained wordless for some minutes. Then Farrell said:

"We should have known it, the minute we left that crazy planet. We had a special kind of destiny . . ."

"I don't want that kind of destiny," Damon said fiercely. "I don't want to be part of it. I'd rather die in space . . ."

"They say the world will end in fire," London said dreamily. "And we're the fire . . ."

"Not if we can help it! Not if they can stop us. Ivers. Ivers!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Do some figuring, you and London. Find out when we can expect to be within radio range."

"I can tell you that," the math expert said. "At the speed we're at now, eight or nine days. But if the ratio doubles again, half that time."

"Linda," Ivers said.

"What?"

"Linda." His eyes were round. "Linda's expecting me, Captain. We hardly had a honeymoon. Linda didn't like that much, Captain. Only a

couple of days, and then I had to leave . . ."

Damon examined his face sharply.

"Snap out of it, Rick."

"Hell of a thing," Ivers said, starting a giggle in his throat. "We went to a hotel on Park Avenue, very fancy, and the air-conditioning was on the fritz. Hell of a way to start a honeymoon . . ."

"Take it easy, Rick." London touched him gently.

"Be damned nice, seeing Linda. How about you, London? Why didn't you ever get hitched? Afraid of the responsibility?" The giggle began to emerge from his parted lips.

"He's flipping," Farrell drawled. "Maybe I better give him a shot—"

"Shoot!" Rick Ivers shouted suddenly, leaping to his feet. "Why don't they shoot!"

"Watch out—" London grabbed for his arm, but the younger man batted his hand away savagely.

"Can't let 'em do it! Can't let 'em do it, Captain!"

He leaped towards the bulkhead, and ripped a wrench from its magnetic grip on the metal wall. Before they even knew his purpose, he was at the radio mechanism, battering the faces of the instruments, smashing and destroy-

ing the transistors. Farrell was on him seconds later, his big hands grappling for the destructive tool, but Ivers had found superior strength in his unthinking panic. He lashed out and Farrell was thrown back by the force of his blow. London and Captain Damon took over the attack, but it was many minutes before they could subdue the berserk navigator.

When it was over, Ivers lay sobbing on his bunk, and Farrell was looking hopelessly at the damage to the radio gear.

"It's a mess," he said, shaking his head. "A terrible mess. He didn't get at the receiving unit—but the sending equipment's shot to pieces."

Damon seemed to be fighting for self-control. Then he lost the battle, and threw himself at the young man on the bunk.

"You stinking coward!" he screamed. "You traitor—"

"Stop it, Captain!" London, his own face struggling with emotion, tore Damon away. "It wasn't his fault. He wasn't thinking straight—"

"He's made sure of it now," Damon said, panting. "He's fixed us for sure. Now we've got the destiny for sure..."

He staggered towards the viewport.

"God!" he said. "Don't let it

happen. Don't let it be our fault. . . ." He continued to plead in wild panic.

In four days, the *Genesee* was traveling at the speed of 167,000 miles a second.

"Another day," London said quietly. "Maybe less."

"How's Rick?"

"Sleeping. I'm keeping him pretty well drugged up, Captain, if that's okay with you. It wouldn't be such a bad thing if he slept right through the—" He stopped.

"I know," the captain said. "It might be a good idea for all of us. So we won't have to think about what we're doing. About destroying a billion years of trying..."

"We can always get lucky. A meteor might hit us before we reach Earth—"

"Even that wouldn't help now. The mineral's got enough explosive energy stored up to destroy the solar system right now. It's inexorable, London, that's the only word for it. We're a juggernaut..."

"Captain." Farrell was looking in his direction. "I've been getting some response from the radio. Want to hear it?"

"No. Yes," Damon said. "Let's hear it."

There were ten minutes of squeaks and groans from the

receiver, and then the voice of a man.

*"... a sacred dedication, a holy purpose, a one-mindedness, one-heartedness for all the peoples of Earth. These are the goals of the Federation, the goals we will seek and find or die ..."*

"What the hell," London said. "That doesn't sound like CIB headquarters."

"We've picked up a public broadcast," the captain said. "Almost sounds like Culver, the Federation President ..."

"It does at that. Funny, ain't it? Next thing you know we'll be getting singing commercials. Hell of a way to face the end of the world ..."

"Listen," Damon said.

*"... Seventh Moon forces are deploying about Tycho Brahe crater in the hope of trapping the insurrectionists. Reports from the Martian headquarters say ..."*

"Something's screwy," London said. "Sounds like an old news broadcast, during the Moon Revolt. Must be some kind of special program ..."

There was a snatch of music, oddly distorted, but the melody caused London to start in surprise.

"Now I know I'm nuts," he said. "That song's a hundred years old if it's a day."

"What's the difference?" Damon said wearily.

"He got up and walked to the velocity gauges.

"Look," he said bitterly. "Scientific history is made, gentlemen. We've passed the speed of light."

"No kidding?" London joined him, and whistled. "You're right. 188,979 a second. Unless we figured the instrumentation wrong—"

"It's right," Damon sighed. "It was inevitable, at the ratio we're increasing. It's a great scientific achievement—but it comes at the wrong time. We can't do anything with it."

"What an opportunity. Einstein would've given his soul for this chance, eh, Captain? But I don't *feel* any different. I didn't disappear or anything. Isn't that what's supposed to happen?"

"I don't know. Nobody ever had the chance to find out. Except us—"

Farrell said: "This radio's getting curiouser and curiouser, Captain. I'd swear I'm getting broadcasts from the last century—"

Damon didn't answer, but his face reflected a thought so strange that the crewmen stopped talking and waited for his next words.

"The speed of light," he whispered.

"What's on your mind, Captain?"

"Once they believed it was impossible to pass it. But we did. The mineral did it for us . . ."

"So what?"

"They said that nothing could surpass the speed of light without drastic results. Even the complete reversal of Time . . ."

London snorted. "Bunk. Nothing can go back in Time. That's a madman's dream."

"Nothing could travel at our speed, once. But now we've done it—and maybe something else. Maybe we're going backwards in Time—maybe that's what accounts for the strange broadcasts we're getting—"

"They've stopped," Farrell told him. "Reception's ended."

"Receiver okay?"

"Looks perfect to me. Just no more signals, that's all."

"Because there weren't any. Not at our moment in history. . . ."

"You ain't serious?" London said. "You really think we're Time-traveling now?"

"I do." Damon went to the viewport. "We're looking at a younger universe now. We're going back, every second."

"And what happens when we reach Earth?"

"The same thing that would have happened before . . . We'll destroy it, utterly. Maybe the entire solar system . . ."

"But that's what's so impossible!" London snorted in disbelief. "If we destroy a younger Earth, then we'll have destroyed the future. That means there wouldn't have been any *Genesee*, or any planet *Vexa*, or you or me or Farrell, or Ivers, or any crazy metal—"

"He's right there, Captain," Farrell drawled softly. "It's a paradox, that just can't happen. We can't destroy our own being before it existed."

"I can't explain. I just know it's the truth. It's the only answer . . ."

They stood at the viewport together, while Rick Ivers slept his drugged sleep, his face peaceful in dreams.

"Another hour maybe," London said.

"Even less," Farrell answered.

"The destiny," Captain Damon said. "But what is it?"

"I can't take this," London tore his gaze from the viewport and went to the analog computer. "I've got to keep busy. I'll track us, and see where we are."

"Good idea," Damon said.

Twenty minutes later, the mathematician looked up.

"We're almost there. We're almost home."

"Ship's changing motion," Damon said. "I'm beginning to feel it. How about you?"

"You're right. We're getting ready to descend. The metal's pulling us there..."

In the next moment, the viewport was struck by a blaze of light so intense that the three men threw their hands protectively before their eyes.

"Good God!" Damon said. "What is it?"

"The sun—"

"No!" London shouted. "Our sun never looked like that—"

"It's crazy! It's all so very wrong—"

"This can't be our system. We've gone haywire. The damn metal's taken us into hell—"

"It's a giant star," Damon said, his voice unsteady, "It's not the sun—"

"But it has to be. There's no other answer—"

"We're heading into it! Temperature's going up—"

"God, it's hot!"

"This is wrong, all wrong!"

Where's the Earth? Where's the Moon? Where's the planets?"

"There's only the sun. That giant sun—"

"God, God!" Damon cried suddenly, falling to his knees before the awesome ball of fire whose dreadful light and heat was filling the interior of the ship. "God, thank you, thank you—"

"No! No!" Damon shouted, over the mounting roar of the colossal furnace that was drawing them to their death. "You don't understand! None of us understood! This is our *real* destiny. To *create* the Earth, not destroy it! To *make* the solar system, not end it! This is what it was for—this is why it happened—"

They never heard his final words. The giant sun beckoned, and the ship answered its call, speeding into the heart of great star, bringing a clash of atoms that rocked the cosmos with the might of its explosive force, sending great fiery fragments spinning into space. If God had been counting, the number would be Nine.

THE END



# THE CYCLES OF CHE

By ROY CARROLL

*The nations on the planet Che had problems that could be solved only by a war. So they went about setting one up. The results were so surprising that perhaps our own world-leaders had better study them. But then again, perhaps they shouldn't.*

THE land area of the planet Che is divided almost equally between two nations, Hailand and Bhiland, but the equality ends there.

Hailand, ruled by the arrogant and wealthy dictator Hai, had everything: wealth, resources and goods for sale. Bhiland, which is ruled by King Bhi, had nothing except that its people were considered very intellectual. But since the cheapest commodity in any world is brains, the people of Bhiland were starving.

Hailand had its problems too because no one bought the goods and raw materials it produced. Bhiland had no money to buy

anything and there was no international trade.

It would seem that Hailand would have wanted to leave well enough alone, but Dictator Hai was tired of living with nobody to talk to but a bunch of stupid millionaires. And his roving eye settled on Bhiland which was full of intellectuals who talked about philosophy and stuff.

The man who had everything wanted something more and he proposed a war of aggression. His proposal was taken up at a private meeting with a bunch of influential citizens that he could blame if anything went wrong.

"We haven't had any history on this planet for several cen-

turies," Hai explained, "so we're long overdue for a war."

An influential citizen named Dee took exception. "My dear Mr. Dictator," he said, "don't you know that the reason we haven't had any wars is because we have converted all of our iron and copper into machinery and power plants that have made us the greatest nation on the planet? You don't expect us to tear down our factories to make a few guns to shoot those egg-heads in Bhiland, do you?"

The dictator smiled. "Indeed I don't. We'll use bombs."

"But bombs need iron and copper too."

"No," said Hai, "any metal can be used for bombs and that's the practical side of our war. In our treasury lie tons of old gold and silver that aren't doing anybody any good. We can make this war very practical by dropping gold and silver bombs. After the war, Bhi's land will be worth something to mine out the bomb fragments. The people of Bhiland will have cash to buy our goods and the planet will be prosperous again."

The crafty individual citizens bowed and nodded and smiled and agreed it was a perfectly lovely idea for war and as soon as the meeting was over they all went out and got passports for Bhiland.

In Bhiland they started buying real estate, in order to be in on the ground floor of a good thing. Very soon the price of real estate rose to an all time

high in Bhiland and the Hailand influential citizens ran out of money. So they wired home to their friends to come and use their capital, because it was senseless for the gold and silver to get into the hands of a bunch of geniuses who didn't know how to make use of it.

But the Bhilanders were using the money to their own advantages. As fast as a man sold his property, he got a passport to Hailand and bought a factory. Factories were cheap because of the low ebb in international trade.

In Bhiland, the millionaires were finding life very rugged because they were without the comfort to which they were accustomed and they had no where-withal to get it. But the Bhilanders who were manufacturing goods in Hailand and looking for profits generously offered to accept mortgages on their property in Bhiland.

As fast as this was done, the whole planet became prosperous.

By that time Hai was ready for his war. But he learned from spies that it would be very bad to make war at this time, because Bhiland was filled with influential citizens from Hailand who would get mad at the dictator if he dropped bombs on their heads.

Besides, there were a large number of geniuses in Hailand now and the dictator could discuss philosophy and the arts any time he pleased.

Then the economy began to



collapse because the ex-Hailanders in Bhiland had exhausted their capital and without a war their investments were worthless. So they defaulted on their mortgages and returned to Hailand. And the ex-Bhilanders who had been doing a brisk trade, no longer had a foreign market for their goods. So they went into bankruptcy and returned home.

Things were immediately ripe for the war that Hai was planning.

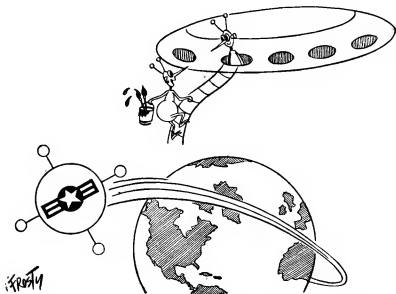
But the minute he announced

mobilization, a large number of millionaires immigrated to Bhiland and began to buy real estate.

There is no use repeating the narrative of the cycles of Hailand and Bhiland and the war that was always eminent, but which never was declared. There was never any stability on the planet Che after that.

But there was always prosperity—either at hand or around the corner.

**THE END**



"There! That should make our American friends happy."

# The Truth And *The Image*

By MARK MALLORY

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*When this story came in we read it carefully and put it into the reject pile. Then it began to bother us; like a small stone in our shoe or an itch where we couldn't scratch it. A rereading was obviously in order, after which the author found a check in the mail. It's that kind of a story. So find out if you have the same experience. If so, you'll enjoy the second reading more than the first.*

---

ROBBO LAZARUS laughed and screamed, he sobbed and giggled, he wrung his hands, made funny faces and drooled. He had become the sorriest excuse for a man that John David had ever encountered.

"Deliver us," said John David, and it was more of a retch than a prayer. He ran his long fingers through his reddish hair and turned his face away.

"Tick-tack, tick-tack," said Robbo. He screamed and sobbed some more, shaking his head and sending his uncut, black mane of hair tumbling down over his eyes.

John David felt sorry for Robbo, as good a man as ever

left the earth to travel through hyperspace. The pitiful thing was that John David could do nothing about Robbo's condition. In all this flying laboratory that was called an interstellar ship, there was no cure for a brain gone to pot. And it had been a good brain; one of the best.

Not that it was an unusual case. Things like this happened too often in the dark areolas between the stars. John David recalled one case where every last man of a crew of five had cracked under the pace of sub-space flight. There were medical explanations by the dozen, but no one factor seemed to be respon-

sible for making men lose their minds in high-speed flight. Possibly it was a combination of weightlessness, acceleration, hyperspace mach, and good old-fashion mental limitations that brought it on. Maybe old Bill Boston, who had dragged many an insane pilot off a returning spaceship, was right when he said: "If God had intended man to travel in space, he would have made him of iron, like a meteor."

Bill had said that to Crick Thompson, who had cracked on the next time out. And when old Bill pulled him out of the pilot's room, Crick was blinking his eyes and going "Whish, whish, I'm a meteor made of iron."

Funny about those hallucinations. Robbo just sat laughing, sobbing and tick-tacking, thinking he was a time bomb.

"Tick-tack, tick-tack," said Robbo. "Boy, just wait till my fuse starts going."

"Stop it!" choked John David. He pulled on the butt of his air-pistol for the umteenth time, then let it slide back into the holster. John David didn't have the heart to shoot this sobbing wretch, the man who had been his best friend.

Not twenty-four hours ago, when Robbo cracked, John David had strapped on the gun. It was powerful enough to kill a man, but it wouldn't send a bullet through the hull.

Through the hours of waiting, John David had watched for signs of sanity in Robbo. Some-

times the madness of space went away quickly, but other times it stayed on for months, even years. But the flight was nearing its end and Robbo could be given rest and treatment, providing the planet was right.

No one had been near the little yellow sun before. But it was a G-type star, likely to have planets like the Earth. Its beams already were soaking into the thermochroid surface of the spaceship. In a few hours, John David would know. Already it was time to turn off the heating plant, and to start the cooling system.

"Tick-tack, tick-tack!" said Robbo. "I'm set to explode pretty soon."

Would there be a planet to land on? For Robbo's sake, John David hoped so. The man might not survive flight to another system, especially the acceleration that had to be.

One hour, two hours, three hours, John David waited. Finally, he shoved with his feet and sent himself spinning across the cabin to a grab rail near the telescope. He caught the rail, set his magnetic boots to the floor and eased himself to a stop. He peered into the telescope.

He turned and twisted the 'scope and at last he found it. A small, greenish point of light, far to the left of the yellow sun. He focused the spectroscope and breathlessly checked the absorption lines . . . oxygen, carbon dioxide, water . . . almost identical to the Earth.

"Soon it'll be over, Robbo," John David said.

"Tick-tack, tick-tack!" Robbo sobbed. "You'll never put my pieces together again."

Robbo did not resist when John David strapped him in his contour chair, with his arms inside the gravity harness so that he could not free himself. Making sure Robbo was secure, John David floated back to the controls, where he fixed his own straps to relieve his body, gaunt and tall, from the deceleration shock. But John David's arms were free, and he pressed a switch and waited.

Instruments checked the planet and automatically computed the orbit necessary for a quick landing. These figures were fed back into robot controls.

Then the straps tugged at John David's limbs and body. Blood seemed ready to burst the arteries of his brain.

Behind John David, Robbo gurgled and laughed under the punishment of inertia. Nothing seemed to jerk him to reality.

At last the great ship splashed deep into the atmosphere of the cloud-clothed planet. Tension of the straps eased as the deceleration slacked to a gentle fall. Blood surged back from John David's brain and he felt the pull of real gravity under his feet.

With a gentle bump, the craft struck the ground, tottered a moment, then stood still.

"Tick-tack, tick-tack," said

Robbo, the time bomb. "Any second now."

John David climbed down from the ship. He stood on the fire-baked soil that had been lashed by his rockets and inhaled the fresh pure air that came from the hills not far away.

He noticed he had come down in some sort of enclosure, which had a high wire fence-like structure running around it. Intelligent people lived here. He hoped they had hospitals and could understand Robbo's illness.

Suddenly a scream rent the air. There was a hubbub of chattering cries, and John David saw figures streaming through an opening in the enclosure.

At first he thought they were hideous creatures, then he realized they were almost human, except for the strange dismal expressions on their faces. They were dressed in many colors, but the blue ones seemed to be in authority as they waved their hands and motioned the others back.

John David raised his hand, the universal gesture of peace and friendship. "I am from the Earth," he said, loudly and distinctly, not expecting to be understood, but hoping to convey from the tone of his voice that he was a peaceful caller. "I am from a planet of a star far away." He waved his hand toward the heavens.

One of the blue-clad figures put something to his lips, and a rhythmic, musical tone seemed

to rise and fall above the shouts and hubbub of those sombre beings behind him.

More blue ones came and formed a circle. They closed in, with dancing steps, like mad dervishes. Then one single figure, dressed in white, sprung forward and seemed to lead the group toward him.

And the white one carried a knife!

There was death in his eyes, and madness in his face as he came, step by step, toward John David.

The spaceman fell back toward the ship. He fumbled for the rungs of the ladder leading back to the locks.

But a foot pressed down on his knuckles and from above came a sobbing laugh. Robbo, whom John David had strapped in a chair, was climbing down the ladder, the broken gravity harness still clinging to his massive shoulders.

Robbo's foot kicked John David away from the ladder. With madman's strength, Robbo jumped down and clasped the spaceman about the body, while the white-clad figure danced forward with his glistening knife.

"Tick-tack, tick-tack!" Robbo muttered.

"Tick-tack!" echoed the white-clad figure. Behind him the blue ones screamed, the throbbing music echoed, and the white-clad figure stabbed with the knife.

John David opened his eyes.

He was in a room, sitting in a chair, rocking slowly back and forth. Around him were other men, silent, grim-looking men, working with their hands, working with their fingers and doing nothing.

One of the men sat on a table, writing with a sort of pen. John David went toward him, and noted that he was jotting curious hieroglyphs in columns on a sheet of paper-like material.

John David's eyes swept the room. He saw one man enclosed in a jacket, a strait-jacket, with his arms tied behind him. And suddenly John David realized that this was all wrong. Not one of these men was crazy. They were all sane. Those mad dancers in blue and white who were on the outside were the mad ones. Robbo, who screamed and babbled, was like them and therefore sane, while John David, who had been different, like these grim, silent men, seemed crazy. If he could only make someone understand!

John David approached the man who was writing. He looked down and saw that the marks were undecipherable, but there were geometric figures on the paper and John David understood. This man was not crazy, he was a mathematician. The crazy people had put a brilliant man in here!

A key turned in a lock and a door opened. Weird sounds of laughter drifted into the room, and John David turned to see Robbo and one of the natives of

the planet entering. The native carried a knife.

"He's calmed down," said the native, who was the man in white who had stabbed John David. "I won't need to give him another hypodermic."

"You speak English!" said John David. "Listen, please, sir! I am not crazy. It is the man beside you who has lost his mind. He seems to be space-mad!"

The man did not seem to hear. Instead he turned to Robbo, and spoke. "Your best friend, you say? A very sad case. He's definitely homicidal."

"We've been on many a voyage together," said Robbo. "Do you think he'll recover?"

"Sometimes they do," said the man with a shrug. "You had a

narrow escape, my friend. He had a gun on him."

"He had an urge to use it once or twice, but I think his hallucinations got the better of him." Robbo looked sad. "He thought he was landing on an undiscovered planet—didn't even recognize the sun's spectrum. But a spaceman to the core, he picked the Earth to land on, instead of Mars."

"If you ask me," said the man, who strangely enough resembled old Bill Boston, "it's lucky for you he thought he was a time bomb and apt to go off, instead of using his gun."

John David laughed and wept. What a silly mistake! All the time he was the one set to explode, not Robbo. Any moment now . . .

**THE END**



# RUSSIA INTENDS TO STAY AHEAD

By DR. ARTHUR BARRON

We don't care for overworked wards like genius, but we're tempted to use it to classify Dr. Arthur Barran. At twenty-eight, the list of his activities and achievements would wear out a battery of typesetters. To list a few, he is: A graduate of the Russian Institute at Columbia University; Director of Surveys at The Research Institute of America; lecturer on sociology at Queens College; specialist in Russian and master of four languages; a writer who has appeared in *The New Republic*, *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, *Film Media*, and *Challenge*. But most important of all, Dr. Barran has some startling things to say on a variety of fascinating subjects and he'll be saying them each month in **AMAZING STORIES**. You're going to like this young fireball.

Science is more than a form of inquiry, an activity. It is a social institution as well. Like all institutions, it functions in the context of an organized so-

ciety. It contributes to the functioning of society and, in turn, is dependent on it for support and direction. The character it assumes reflects its social setting.

If there is good "fit" between science and other social institutions, research will proceed creatively. If there are strains, work will go badly.

## *A Comfortable Cliche*

It has been argued that such strains exist between science and society in totalitarian social systems, that science and despotism are incompatible. For a long time, this has been a comfortable cliché of Western liberal thought: that genuine scientific advancement is impossible within a dictatorship.

Unfortunately, this cliché fails to stand up in the face of hard evidence to the contrary. By every measure the Soviet Union is a totalitarian society. Yet the fact that Soviet science is extremely good is indisputable.

The list of Soviet achievements in science is long and impressive: the sputniks, the first inexpensive and practical fusion process, the world's largest synchrocyclotron, the systematic translation and abstraction of 8,000 foreign scientific journals, the annual training of double the number of scientists and engineers graduated here, a universal public school curriculum which consists of 41%

science and math, the world's first nuclear power plant, a workable experimental technique of muscle regeneration for laboratory animals, a highly effective flu vaccine, outstanding theoretical work in such advanced fields as topology, probability theory, reaction kinetics, catalysis, solid states, information theory, transistor electronics, and hydrodynamics. These are accomplishments which not only rival our own, but actually surpass them in many instances. Far from being incompatible with science, Soviet totalitarianism seems to nourish it. Clearly, there are features of Soviet society extremely congenial to scientific progress.

### *Totalitarianism & Science*

Oddly enough, Soviet science flourishes in many cases not in spite of the oppressive features of the regime but *because* of them. For one thing, the lack of freedom in all other areas of Soviet life makes science very attractive. Because it is the only career in which a Soviet intellectual can work with autonomy and freedom, it attracts the very best talent. The most creative and inquiring minds in the USSR gravitate to it naturally. There is no problem of recruitment.

As a totalitarian state, moreover, the USSR can mobilize its scientific resources better than the West. That this is often

done at the expense of individual freedom does not detract from its effectiveness.

Physicians in this country, for example, need to obtain permission from relatives of the dead to conduct autopsies. Soviet doctors, however, have been given this privilege by the regime. Here, scientists and engineers are allowed to pursue careers of their own choosing, even though they may have been trained at government expense. As many as 15% of American engineers, by way of illustration, are actively employed in selling. Many other American scientists and technologists choose to go into fields far removed from their speciality. In the USSR this is impossible. All Soviet graduates are compelled to take assignments specified for them by the state. Maximum use of scientific personnel is guaranteed.

Again, the fact that the Soviet economy is centrally planned and run means that a disproportionate share of the budget can be allocated to science, despite the collective preferences of the general population. Soviet investment in heavy industry, science, and technology comes very largely at the expense of the consumer sector of the economy. Yet the population has very little say in this. No public clamor for "tax cuts" interferes with the needs of the science establishment as the regime sees them.



"Storming" of scientific goals, mobilization of the scientific community to achieve specific targets is far more readily achieved in the Soviet Union than here.

This ability of the regime to commit resources in ways solely of its own choosing, incidentally, helps mitigate chronic problems of scarcity. Thus, while it is true the Soviets have far fewer BESM's than we have UNIVAC's, Soviet computers are not put to use solving business and marketing problems. They are devoted exclusively to scientific work. Similarly, scarce materials and facilities are reserved for basic construction, research, and development. In the Soviet Union there is no contest between hardware and frills. Rockets come before automobile fins; science labs come before dishwashers.

Thus, conditions under which the United States functions in times of actual war, are an accepted way of life in the USSR. There, public resentment is placated only when serious upheaval threatens; and then with but meager gestures toward correction and the emergency norm is not disturbed.

Finally, since the regime controls education, curriculae are established which entirely reflect its goals. Since the regime now chooses to stress science training, Soviet school programs at every level are heavily slanted in that direction.

In the United States less than 10% of high school students elect the study of physics. In the Soviet Union (where there are no electives) *all* students are required to study physics.

### ***Overtaking the West***

Another factor which accounts for the vitality of Soviet science is its combativeness. Since its earliest days the Soviet regime set for itself the task of "overtaking" and "surpassing" the West, particularly the United States, in industry, science, and technology. It is difficult to appreciate the degree to which this theme of combat with the West pervades Soviet science. No matter what the sacrifice, the Soviets are grimly determined to demonstrate the superiority of their system. The historical fact that they were once technologically inferior to the West has imparted their scientific work with an amazing drive and energy. Add to this the momentum of world revolution, the regime's attempt to persuade the backward nations of the world that communism alone promises rapid industrialization, and there emerges a tremendous sense of urgency in Soviet science, a basic impetus toward growth and achievement: a truly fanatical determination.

Contrast this spirit and tempo with our own complacency (based on several comfortable decades of superior accom-

plishment) and it becomes clear why Soviet science threatens to prove more dynamic than our own.

### ***Ideology: Incubus or Spur?***

The official ideology of the Soviet Union is dialectical materialism. Because of the many glaring inadequacies of this system of thought, Western observers have tended to regard it as an incubus. Actually, in many respects, it contributes to the vitality of Soviet science.

At the risk of vulgarization, it can be stated that dialectical materialism stresses the priority, primacy, and eternity of matter, the functional interdependence of all phenomena, the inevitability of change, and the scientific method. Obviously, these components of the ideology are congruent with the values of science.

For one thing, they have the effect of raising science to a supreme value in Soviet society. Other approaches to an understanding and appreciation of natural phenomena—faith, intuition, aesthetic experience—are bitterly attacked. Only the scientific approach is encouraged. Scientific optimism, an almost naive faith in the limitless power and compass of science dominates the Soviet mentality.

Secondly, Soviet ideology has the effect of lifting theoretical issues to a position of pre-

eminence. The Soviet emphasis on materialism leads inevitably to a profound preoccupation with such problems as cosmogony, cosmology, ultimate particles, the origin of life. Far more so than their colleagues in the West, Soviet scientists are motivated to explore ultimate theoretical issues. So long have Western observers stressed the practical and applied side of Soviet science, they have become blind to its very impressive sophistication in theory.

Finally, the emphasis placed by the Soviet scientific community on the interdependence of phenomena strongly encourages inter-disciplinary work in the Soviet Union. Intensive cross fertilization of disciplines is one of the major sources of strength of Soviet science. In the USSR such amalgam sciences as bioastronomy, geochemistry, and astrophysics have very wide currency. Science departments in Soviet universities show surprisingly little compartmentalization.

The result of all this is unprecedented prestige and status for science in Soviet society. In the USSR scientists rank at the very top of the prestige ladder, second only to the highest government leaders. Successful researchers are paid more than any other occupational group (again with the exception of the political leadership). Their income, in comparative terms, is nearly two and a half times as great as the income of

American scientists. In addition, Soviet specialists receive such bounties as a car and chauffeur, free winter and summer living quarters, a seven week vacation with pay, free insurance, permission to shop in special stores where scarce consumer goods are sold at a discount, and large bonuses.

In every respect the Soviet scientist is regarded (and treated) as a national hero. In the West the scientist has clearly been given less acclaim and fewer rewards.

### ***Talent Is Where You Find It***

Mention must also be made of the Soviets' encouragement and support of talent, regardless of sex, financial, ethnic, or social factors. Education in the Soviet Union is entirely state sponsored. The first ten grades of the school system, equivalent to our own primary and secondary grades, are entirely free. College and graduate training is free for all students who "make their grades." State support includes not only tuition, but all living expenses as well. For honor students there are special increments. It is a hard fact that no bright Soviet student need drop out of school because of inability to pay.

In this country, however, scholarships amount to only somewhat less than 5% of the total income of all college students. The median stipend, moreover, is extremely small,

less than \$300. Only 12% of those enrolled as college freshmen graduate, while only 50% of all children entering the first grade finish high school. A large proportion of these "drop outs" are related to finances. As long as this disproportion in educational budget exists between the US and the USSR, the Soviets will continue to outproduce us in scientists and technicians.\*

The Soviets also make more effective use of womanpower. Here, women account for about a third of all professionals. In the Soviet Union they account for a full half. In the United States less than one percent of American engineers are women; in the USSR a full quarter are women. Here, less than 5% of medical doctors are women; there, well over two-thirds are. In this country less than one percent of Ph.D graduates are women. In the Soviet Union the total passes better than six percent.

All this would seem to indicate that the Soviets offer greater encouragement to all students to continue with their education than is now the case in the West. Unquestionably, this is having the effect of providing the Soviets with insurance that they will produce

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\*We cannot deny that Dr. Barron's point is well taken. Yet, if his implied indictment of the American system is accepted as completely accurate, one wonders how the United States achieved world scientific supremacy in the first place. Obviously, other factors temper this argument greatly.—Editor.

sufficient numbers of scientists and technicians. In this country no such insurance exists. Quite the contrary is the case. Already, the nation faces a shortage of science professionals.

### ***Implications***

An analysis of certain aspects of Soviet society reveals a great deal of congruence between Soviet totalitarianism and science. By and large, Soviet ideology and institutions support and encourage creative science. Apparently, the Soviet experience indicates that a totalitarian society can attract good minds to science, mobilize scientific resources, and effect a good fit between its ideology and the needs and wants of science. The evidence of this resides in the undeniable achievements which Soviet science has made.

That these facts come as a bitter surprise to the West is understandable. In certain areas, it is true, (genetics, for example) Soviet totalitarianism *has* had an adverse impact on science. It is also true that official Soviet literature is replete with the confessions of error of

scientists, recantations, polemics, and political directives to scientists. This would seem to indicate a vast and destructive control over science by commissar.

In view of this it has been dangerously easy to fail to recognize that the damage done is less real than apparent, that much of this is ritualistic camouflage, that in a contest between scientific practicality and ideology the Party will choose practicality nearly every time, that ideological dicta impinge only on the philosophical superstructure of science rather than on the hard bone of science, that Soviet scientists have developed countless evasive techniques for avoiding harmful meddling.

But perhaps the greatest cause for failure to appreciate the true stature of Soviet science is nothing more than a smug and ingrained sense of complacent superiority in the West. The time for this is long past. The sputniks fly overhead. Totalitarianism and science *do* mix. Together, they make a dangerous and frightening brew.

**THE END**



**AMAZING**  
STORIES

SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL

# *The* **SPACE EGG**

By **RUSS WINTERBOTHAM**

**BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE**

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# YOU WILL MEET—

*J. C. Darling.* Big Wheel of the Darling Aircraft Corporation. He has a hot property in the XDW-49 and is wary of his competition.

*Bob Reeve.* Photographer. His job is to get pics of everything above and below during the big test flight. He tells the story.

*Jack Fayburn.* Ace test pilot and right guy. He is marked by destiny for a terrible fate.

*Ruby Cascade.* Red-headed beauty who is picked by Fayburn to be his mate. She is his for better or worse.

*Roger Mall.* His eagerness for the Quisling role pays ironic dividends.

*Janet Deslie.* Mall's secretary, but far more loyal to Bob Reeves.

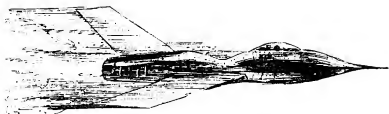
*Dr. Felix Maynard.* A physicist whose brilliance is matched against an enemy that seems to violate every natural law.

*Pat Callinan.* Electronics engineer. He helps build the strangest defensive weapon on record.

*Willy Plotz.* A nobody who became a big man through quiet heroism.

And—

## *The China Egg*



## 1. THE XDW-49

**F**IVE of us were sweating out that 100-degree Tuesday afternoon in a makeshift flight lab. Jack Fayburn was testing the XDW-49 and at the moment he was so high that only God and our instruments could find him.

The others of the crew, 33 in all, counting C. F. Darling himself, were waiting for Jack to come back to the Pennington base of the Darling Aircraft Corporation. I had nothing to do, but my cameras on Jack's plane were working. I hoped.

The base, which had been used years ago by Uncle Sam in wartime, was smack in the middle of Kansas. It had a fence around it and was barricaded with hush. Only a few shiny spots of brass in the Pentagon, besides Darling and our little group knew what was going on. We called it Project Darkness.

Darling wasn't afraid of for-

eign spies as much as he was afraid of competitors. He wanted to be twenty jumps ahead of everybody and the XDW-49 was that kind of a machine.

The bank of instruments in front of Roger Mall, Darling's chief lieutenant, flight engineer and yes-man, was clicking off thousands of feet altitude and Jack hadn't even opened up.

"Really something, C. F." said Roger.

Darling showed his teeth. It might have been a smile; it looked like a snarl. "He hasn't broken a record yet."

That was like him, of course; nothing counted unless it was the biggest, the best, the fastest, the highest or the most powerful.

He came by it honestly, though. Two generations of plane makers, dating back to the times of the Wright Brothers, were behind him. The Darlings were really the flyboy family. Grandpa Darling was killed when his private plane crashed in 1926, when he was 61 years old. Papa Dar-

ling, Charles Bradley, was with the Lafayette Squadron in World War I. He flew the Atlantic in a single-motored plane, soon after Lindbergh did it in 1927.

C. F. himself already had been a flier then. He went along with Admiral Byrd to the Antarctic as a plane mechanic in the 30's. Later he flew around the world, breaking records which stood up for almost two weeks before Wiley Post or somebody broke them. He was still a good pilot, and I had found no boss better in my young, but varied life.

I think he liked me too. "Bob," he said to me, "I want pictures of everything. Movies of the inside and outside of the XDW-49 while it's in flight. Stills of what goes on here at the base. Understand?" I did.

Colonel Van Haber had been sent by the Air Force to see what was going on. He sat by Mall in front of a bank of electronic gear which recorded every wobble the XDW-49 made, as well as every other item of its performance.

Pat Callinan, an electronics engineer, sat in the far corner of the tower from me, wearing ear-phones and talking into a chest mike. A loudspeaker gave us the two-way conversation. There also was a hand mike for C. F. to use, if he had anything to say to Jack personally.

Darling, Mall, Colonel Van Haber, Pat Callinan and me—my name's Bob Reeve, by the way—didn't have much room to move around, but Darling moved

anyhow, stumbling, butting and bumping.

"One hundred thousand feet," said Mall, excitedly. "That ought to be a record, C. F."

"I don't know," said C. F. "I haven't read the papers today."

The XDW-49 was a history maker, all right. As revolutionary as a plane could get, it was rocket powered, vertical takeoff and as close to a spaceship as you could get. Rocket planes had been flown before, but the XDW-49 had a lot of features none of the others had.

Darling was more nervous than ever now that his ship was doing new things.

I stopped watching him and looked out of the window at a brunette and a redhead standing at the edge of the concrete runway. They were also members of our group.

My personal preference was Janet Deslie, the brunette. She was Mall's secretary. I hadn't talked to her more than half a dozen times since I got here, but Jack Fayburn had gotten along well. He didn't have to do anything but risk his neck flying and he could see a lot of her.

She was Mall's secretary. In spite of Fayburn's being around too much, she still smiled at me, so I figured I was in the race.

The red-headed morale builder was wearing a rather scanty bathing suit but the view was spoiled by a beach robe which she'd thrown over her shoulders. This was Ruby Cascade, Darling's secretary pro-tem. Where



Janet was lovely-luscious, Ruby was a cuddly doll with the soul of a panther. Her eyes were green ice, trimmed with snow, in comparison with Janet's cool sapphire blue. Where Janet spoke softly like music, Ruby's voice was harsh and inclined toward a whine when she was trying to be nice. Janet was poised, but not overt; Ruby liked to be the center of attraction.

Ruby and Janet shared the same trailer, between Darling's palace on wheels and Roger Mall's smaller home away from home. These were three of the six trailers parked behind the Barracks. The Barracks housed the bulk of the airbase crew and contained offices and a cafeteria and kitchen. . . .

"What in the hell is holding him back!" Darling yelled impatiently as he looked at the instruments again. It hadn't been more than a minute since he asked the last time, and poor Roger Mall looked very unhappy. "Nothing," Roger said. "He's going all right."

Darling took a step over toward Pat Callinan. "What did Jack just say?"

"He's just talking to himself," Pat said. "Cuss words, mostly."

"Tell him to speak up!"

"He will when he's got something to say," Pat assured Darling. "Right now he's probably easing the pressure on his lungs."

The speaker spluttered again. The sounds a man makes when

he's engaged in physical labor. "Damn!" said Jack. That was plain enough.

"Humph," said Darling. "Hope he doesn't get us in Dutch with the FCC."

"That's not cussing," said Pat. "If it is, it's polite."

"What's his speed?" Darling shouted.

"Twenty-one hundred," said Van Haber. "That's a record, I'm sure."

"He'll go faster," said Darling. "He'll hit three thousand or I'm a monkey." He pulled a cigar from his pocket, lit it and let it go out immediately as he turned to talk with Pat. "Plug me in," he said, reaching for the hand mike.

Callinan picked up the plug and inserted it in the radio panel.

"Jack!" Darling yelled into the mike.

More grunts and groans came over the speaker. Then I caught part of a sentence. "Must be Wichita."

"Jack. Jack, dammit. Answer me!"

"He's not even near Wichita," said Van Haber. "He's north. Probably he sees Lincoln, Nebraska."

"Jack!" Darling's voice broke with this call.

Still no answer. Roger Mall checked the instruments. "One hundred forty thousand," he said.

"Please, Jack," said Darling, talking softly this time. "Answer me."



Only the highest and the fastest was good enough for J. C.

"Ugh. That you, Boss?" Jack spoke clearly now. I had a hunch that Jack had been deliberately ignoring Darling as long as he yelled.

"Are you all right? Why didn't you answer me?"

"I've been busy. Where am I?"

"North. You ought to be near Lincoln and you're up a hundred and forty thousand feet. You've broken all records."

"Whaddaya know! I thought I was near Wichita."

"Can you stick it out?"

"Sure. It's getting easier all the time."

Darling sucked on his cigar. "How does the plane act?"

"First rate, C. F. I had trouble getting the hang of the steering rockets, but now I'm okay. The rudder doesn't take hold up here."

I looked out of the window again. Dr. Felix Maynard, the physicist who'd turned rocket engineer, had joined Janet and Ruby at the edge of the field. I liked Doc, a quiet sort of man until he got on his favorite subject—science. Once he started talking about power and energy, nobody could stop him. Janet, dressed prettily in pedal pushers and a yellow blouse, was talking to him now, so Doc hadn't gotten off on science yet.

"Are you at maximum speed, Jack?" C. F. was saying.

"Very near," said Roger Mall.

"I'm still accelerating," Jack said. "I can make two-twenty thousand feet, if I don't die first.

The pressure suit's worse than the pressure."

The seconds clicked off. Then Mall shouted, "Two hundred and twenty thousand feet!"

I cheered, so did Pat. Colonel Van Haber looked annoyed. To him it was all business.

"Jack!" Darling squealed, "you made it!"

"Thank you, Pappy," said Jack. "Can I come down now?"

Mall stirred in his seat and turned toward Darling. "He's got enough fuel for ten more minutes," he said. "He might make two-fifty."

"I don't want you to try more than you can take," Darling said, lowering his voice to a persuasive tone. "But you've got enough fuel to try for another thirty. That is, if you want to."

There was a silent moment. "I think—"

Jack's voice broke off. I thought I heard a faint tinkling sound over the loudspeaker.

"What the hell," said Jack.

"Something's wrong," said Van Haber, watching the instruments. "He's losing altitude."

"Maybe he decided to come down."

"Boss!" Jack's voice lashed out sharp and crisp. "I'm losing cabin pressure! Something busted the plexiglass." He paused a moment. "There's a big hole in it! . . . Oops!"

There was another tinkling sound, plainer this time.

"Another one! Another hole!"

The radio was silent.

I remembered my cameras on

the plane. We'd have a picture of it, unless the plane fell and smashed the cameras and exposed the film.

"He's losing altitude fast," said Roger Mall.

At two hundred and twenty thousand feet there was nothing to hit. Absolutely nothing. The air at that level is a good laboratory vacuum, although, of course, there are a few stray molecules floating around. The air pressure is so low that human blood will boil unless artificial pressures are used. The loss of cabin pressure wouldn't hurt Jack as long as his uniform was intact.

But there shouldn't have been anything big enough at that altitude to smash the cabin plexiglass. A meteor, maybe, but a meteor would wreck the plane.

Jack Fayburn had hit something where there shouldn't have been anything to hit. But there had to be something!

## 2. TROUBLE UPSTAIRS

**S**WEAT rolled off Darling's face and dripped down his shirt. "Jack! For God's sake, what's the matter?"

Mall had been watching the tape in the recording machine. He turned, his pink face glistening. "Everything seems to be in order, C. F., except that the plane's losing altitude and decelerating."

"Good God, man! He might be

falling and that ship's worth ten million dollars."

I felt like reminding Darling that Jack was in the ship, too, and to hell with the ten million. But I didn't.

Colonel Van Haber spoke. "He's not falling, Mr. Darling. The plane seems to be under control." Van Haber looked young for the eagle on his shoulder straps. But he knew his stuff. He was under so many security blankets that I suspected that half of the time he didn't dare let himself know what he was doing for fear of spilling it.

Pat Callinan had been trying to raise Jack. "Hello, Jack . . . Jack, this is Pat . . . Anything wrong? . . . Isn't your radio working? . . . Come in, please."

I almost jumped when Jack cleared his throat and made a noise that sounded like a groan. Darling picked up the telephone. He pressed the button that connected him with the garage to the right of the flight lab where Dr. Harlan Grant, the company physician, was waiting for Jack to return.

"Hello . . . hello . . . hello! That you, Harlan? Jack's coming down! Be ready!" Darling slammed the phone back into its cradle and whirled, squinting his eyes at the tape in front of Roger Mall. "I heard him groan," said Darling. "He's hurt. Maybe whatever crashed into his plane hit him!"

"What's up there to hit his plane?" said Mall.

Darling shook his head. He

picked up the mike again. "Jack! Tell me what's the matter!"

There was no answer.

Darling looked wildly at Mall, who turned around and began watching the instruments to avoid his gaze.

"Hello, Jack," came Pat's quiet voice over the loudspeaker.

"Hello, Pat." Jack answered as if nothing had ever been wrong. "Where in hell am I?"

"Just a minute. I'll check."

"What was the matter with you, Jack?" Darling demanded. "Why didn't you answer us? Did you black out?"

There was a slight pause before Jack answered. Then his voice rolled in from the speaker hard as steel. "Never mind what happened, C. F. Just stop blowing your top and yelling like a banshee. I want to know where I am."

Jack Fayburn could be expected to be temperamental. He'd never exhibited a nasty side but he was under a terrific strain.

"I'll tell him," said Van Haber, reaching for the hand microphone. "Jack, you're southwest of Topeka and losing altitude. You're still over one hundred fifty thousand feet, so you've got plenty to lose. Pull out of your dive and decelerate about ten minutes. At your speed, you ought to be about to Hays, or a little north of there—"

I whistled to myself. Between Topeka and Hays lie a good 200 miles of flat prairie, but Jack was flying in a circle, so he'd be

going much farther—perhaps 350 miles. That would put him up to 1,800 miles an hour.

"You can spot Hays by the state college," the colonel went on. "By that time you'll be able to pick up our radio beacon and come on in."

There was a little pause. Then Jack answered. "Gotcha, Colonel. Guess I was a little dizzy a minute or two. I'm okay now."

"Fine, Jack," said Van Haber. "We'll be waiting to talk to you." He paused and looked back at Darling as he asked the next question. "What hit the plane, Jack?"

There was no reply.

Darling reached out and snatched the mike away from Van Haber. "Jack, is the plane all right?"

There was a moment of silence. Then Jack spoke. "Shut up, you drive me nuts, C. F."

Darling gasped. Granted Jack was a highly skilled and valuable young man, nobody tells the boss to shut up twice, no matter how skilled, or how valuable. Besides, it wasn't like Jack at all.

Darling fumbled in his shirt and brought out another cigar. "Something must be wrong with him," he said. "It isn't like him to be like that." He acted the fond parent, whose brat has just kicked the parson in the shins.

I tucked my portable movie camera into the crook of my arm and went through the door. I had to get some good shots of Jack landing. . . .

Ruby and Janet put aside their

soft drinks as I approached. "Is Jack coming in?" Janet asked.

I nodded, noting how nifty she was stacked in pedal pushers and yellow blouse.

"Everything go all right?" Ruby asked.

"He broke all the records," I said. "There was some trouble—I don't know what, exactly."

"I'm glad he's all right," said Janet. I told myself the relief in her voice was only normal concern over a friend and that she might have said the same thing if I'd been in that plane. I was trying hard to convince myself I was still in the running.

Ruby gave a little squeal as she saw Darling coming down the stairway from the tower. I turned and watched her advance to meet him. She had an intriguing wiggle when she walked. Turning back, I saw Janet grinning. "Just a normal red-blooded American wolf-boy," she said.

I grinned. "How'd you like to ride into Salina with me. I've got to put the films on a train for Kansas City this afternoon so they'll be developed and sent back tomorrow."

"I'm not very fixed up," she said, spreading her hand toward her pedal pushers.

"I won't leave for about forty minutes. You'll have time to pretty up, which shouldn't be hard for you."

"Flattery will get you no place."

"Maybe bribery will. We'll eat in Salina's finest hash house."

"Ah! You've tempted me."

I heard the buzz of a rocket and I knew that Jack was coming in. Darling and Ruby hurried toward us. Darling was feeling much better now, knowing his plane was safe. "Are you using this jeep, Bob?"

"Yes, but I'll need a driver. If you don't mind—"

"No, no! Of course not! I'm glad to be of some use around here." He laughed at his joke. He moved around the jeep and climbed in on the driver's side. I climbed in beside him, moving my still camera and equipment to the back.

The plane was loud now and I looked up to see Jack banking to cut his speed. He circled and then he lowered the landing gear. The pinch-bottle was plainly visible. Like most modern planes the XDW-49 had a "Marilyn Monroe" shape, narrowest where the wings joined the craft. The design created less air resistance at super-sonic speed.

The crash wagon came out of the garage and idled at the edge of the strip to be ready if needed. Two security cops, who served as the crash crew, were in the cab, and Dr. Grant was seated on a roll of hose in the back.

Jack was coming in from the east. I lifted my camera and aimed at the craft, catching it as it kissed the ground and glided across the strip. It came to a stop almost directly in front of the tower, about a mile from the edge of the strip. The two jeeps and the crash wagon all arrived

at the same time. C. F. stopped the jeep and hopped out.

First, I got a picture of the two holes in the plexiglass canopy. They weren't jagged, the kind you get when you throw a rock through a window. They were neat little round holes, almost smooth enough to have been punched out by a drill. One was at the extreme rear of the cockpit, where the canopy bubble starts to rise out of the back of the plane. The other was a little to the right and nearer the front.

The canopy slid back and Jack climbed out. Darling shouted, "Are you all right?"

Jack reached up and loosened the fasteners and pulled the helmet off his head.

Jack's suit fit tightly, and had a rigid inflated lining. Although the oxygen breathed during the flight came from a hose plugged to a tank on the plane, there was a reserve supply in the suit. The extra air was on his chest, which gave him a busty appearance.

Darling was babbling his congratulations but Jack seemed not to hear. He was loosening his gloves, which were zipper-sealed to his suit, when Darling rounded the wing and came up close to him.

"A whale of a job, boy!" he said. "But what made those holes in the plexiglass?"

Jack finally got the gloves off.

"Yes," he said casually, "it was a good flight. The plane acted like a bird."

Willy Plotz came under the

wing just as Jack spoke. He looked up with an odd expression and I knew why. Jack seldom called a rocketship a plane. It was a hot rod, a fire burner, a tube, a Coke-bottle, a nozzle, or even a kettle. And I'd heard Jack say many times that birds had obsolete flying equipment.

Darling pointed up to the canopy. "A meteor? If we've got a meteor menace at only 42 miles off the earth, what'll we have to expect when we operate in space?"

Jack shrugged. "Didn't hurt anything," he said. "Just lost cabin pressure."

Willy Plotz said, "Hell, Jack, you're hurt. Your pressure suit's torn and there's blood on it. Didn't you feel it?"

I turned and looked. Sure enough, Jack's suit had a hole in the back, like he'd snagged it on something sharp, and around the edges was a rim of red.

Instantly, Jack wheeled on Willy. There was a look in his eyes I'll never forget. Fury, hatred, anger. His eyes were slitted, his mouth drawn tight.

Willy had turned and was calling to Dr. Grant in the crash wagon. "Hey, Doc! Jack's hurt!"

"Shut up, you fool!" Jack hissed. "I'm not hurt!"

Willy turned back. He was shocked but he stuck to his guns. "Yes you are, Jack. Maybe you don't know it, but you're hurt."

"Shut up!" Jack barked, and his right fist shot out. Willy seemed to fly back against the

wing. He struck his head and went down to the pavement.

Jack pushed his way past Darling and hopped into the jeep. He stepped on the starter and drove off.

Nobody did anything. Everyone was too startled, except the mechanic who was trying to help Willy up off the ground. Willy finally got his footing and he darted around the wing and waved his fist at Jack. "Come back here, you son of a gun!" Willy turned around toward Darling. "I quit," said Willy. "No jackass flyboy is going to push me around."

Darling looked pale. "Forget it, Willy. Jack's not himself. He's been under a strain. Besides, like you said, he's hurt."

"That's no excuse for slugging me."

"It was inexcusable and Jack must apologize for it. But—"

"Slap hell! He knocked me down!"

"I'll talk to you later, Willy." Darling turned toward Dr. Grant who was standing in the back of the crash wagon. "Better drive in and have a look at him, Doc. There's something wrong."

"You bet," Dr. Grant said, and drove off.

I climbed into the cockpit and examined the pilot's seat and noticed a red smear in the back. I wondered if the object that hit Jack had punctured the pressure suit in high altitude. That would have caused the suit to lose pressure and at the altitude where

Jack had the accident, he would have died instantly and horribly from boiling blood.

Jack hadn't died, so there must have been some other explanation. But something had happened and Jack's whole nature had seemed to change. From the soft spoken, nice guy, he'd started knocking people around.

My eyes turned down. On the seat, nestling between the straps of the safety harness were two pieces of something white.

I picked them up. They were smooth and curved, like sections of a ball made of china. I fitted them together. The edges conformed, but it wasn't a ball. It was egg-shaped. They appeared to be two halves of a broken china egg.

I looked at the holes in the plexiglass. They seemed to be the same size as the egg through its narrow diameter. A china egg floating around in the lower ionosphere, like an artificial satellite? It was hardly likely that Jack Fayburn would bring one along in the XDW-49, unless it was his idea of a good-luck charm.

Jack said that two objects had burst into the cockpit and I looked around for another one. An unbroken one perhaps.

Darling had taken the jeep and returned to the Barracks, leaving me stranded. Walking back, carrying my cameras and film, I realized how hot it was in Kansas. At least 100. I walked and thought about the china egg.

Ridiculous ideas kept popping



into my head. Maybe the china egg was a tiny spaceship that came to earth full of green-skinned Martians who carried zap guns, or ray guns, whichever you prefer.

If that wasn't crazy enough, I visualized the china egg as a radioactive meteor. Or even it might be a message, sealed in this capsule instead of a bottle, thrown overboard by some tentacled space sailor from another world who was shipwrecked on an asteroid.

I got so upset at the things I was thinking that I stopped, put the things I was carrying down on the concrete airstrip and took the fragments from my pocket and looked at them.

They still looked like nothing else but a china egg, cracked around the middle, hardly responsible for changing a man's entire personality.

### 3. THE CHINA EGG

**A**BOUT a third of my 25-foot trailer had been converted into a dark room. It was mine, a hangover from my free-lance career. The other five trailers belonged to the company. Two of them, Darling's and the one occupied by Felix Maynard and Harlan Grant, were 40-footers with awnings and picket fences. Janet's had an awning but it was a little shorter and had no picket fence. The other two, one occupied by Roger Mall and Colonel Van Haber, and the other by

Jack Fayburn, were about the same size as mine.

Parking my cameras and plates in the dark room, I prepared the films for mailing. Then I put a complete change of fresh, dry clothing in a small bag and walked over to the Barracks to take a shower. I left the china egg in my pocket, debating whether to give it to Darling, or take it directly to Dr. Felix Maynard, who'd get it eventually anyhow. I figured the boss ought to know what was going on, so I walked into the Barracks and stopped at Darling's office on the first floor, directly across the hallway from the cafeteria.

Ruby Cascade was standing in front of a wall mirror, combing her orange-tinted hair. There was no welcome in her eyes.

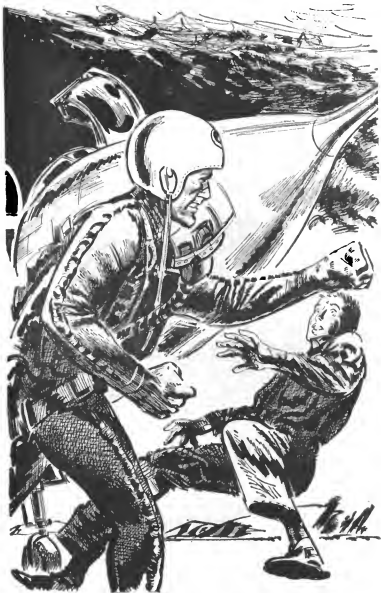
This was odd because Ruby, in spite of her petty faults, was easy to get along with. When she didn't smile, I figured that maybe it was the heat. Everyone was touchy and irritable today. It had even affected Jack Fayburn.

"What do you want?" she said, talking snappishly into the mirror at my reflection. She didn't blink her green eyes in the way she usually did at anything wearing pants.

"Is C. F. in?"

She ran her comb through her hair. "He's busy." She tossed her head toward the partition that closed off the north end of the main office and kept Darling inaccessible from the usual office crew and visitors.

I heard voices through the



Fayburn lashed out. Willy Plotz reeled and went down.

partition and recognized Willy Plotz's nasal tones. "Apologize hell, C. F.!"

"Be reasonable, Plotz!"

"If Fayburn so much as comes near me to apologize, Mr. Darling, so help me, I hope I have a monkey wrench in my hand."

"Now, Willy—"

"I'll go on working for you, Mr. Darling, but I've got some things to settle with that fly-boy."

It was interesting, but I had a date with Janet and I had to mail some films. I turned to go.

Ruby said: "Shall I tell him you called?" She kept looking at me in the mirror.

"Don't bother."

Dr. Felix Maynard was about 60 years old, but he still had his own hair and most of his teeth. He'd once been a physics instructor in a college in Illinois, but experiment with rockets brought him modest fame and eventual employment with Darling. He had supplied most of the theoretical know-how for the XDW-49.

He looked up and grinned as I entered. He was never too busy to talk with a friend, and I'd become well acquainted with him in my short time at the Pennington base.

I pulled the egg-shells from my pocket and put them on the desk in front of him. He glanced up at me, over the top of his glasses.

"What's this?"

"That's what I want to know,

Doc." I told him where I found them, and what they looked like to me. Then I added that they were about the size of the holes in the canopy of Jack's plane, only there were two holes and remains of only one china egg.

"Did you measure the holes?" he asked.

"I didn't try to stick the shells through the holes, if that's what you mean."

He nodded. "I can do that," he said. "Never trust your eyes, boy, except to duck when you want to keep from being hit. Even that doesn't always work."

"My eyes say these are halves of a china egg," I said. "But I didn't believe an egg was floating around in the ionosphere, so I brought them to you."

Maynard picked up the two halves of the shell and examined them. "Looks like a high grade of porcelain," he said. "But it could be a glass base." He raised the objects to the light. "No, I don't think it's obsidian. Too translucent."

"How did it get in Jack's plane?"

"Pilots carry all sorts of good-luck charms. They're superstitious as voodoo doctors."

"I guess maybe that's the best explanation. But it doesn't explain the holes in the plane canopy."

"I didn't think my guess explains anything," Maynard said. "The smart answer is that I don't know what it is. I don't trust my eyes, any more than you. I'll have to study this."

"Okay, Doc." I reached down and picked up the suitcase I'd set on the floor. "You look 'em over and if it's not top-drawer secret, I'd like to know what they are. But I can't wait. I've got a date."

"I'll let you know if I learn anything."

I went across the corridor into the lavatory. Jack Fayburn was just coming out as I entered. He looked at me with unblinking eyes, said nothing and started down the corridor toward the stairs. "Hello, Jack!" I said.

Jack kept on going without replying. To hell with him, I thought.

Dr. Grant was seated on a bench outside the shower room putting his stethoscope into his bag. He looked up at me and said hello.

"Hi, Doc. How's Jack?"

Dr. Grant shook his head. "Too good, if you ask me." He straightened his slight figure with a deep sigh. "I don't know what to make of it."

Dr. Harlan Grant was young, as medics go, with internship still fresh in his mind. He probably had a great deal to learn before he hung up his shingle in private practice, but he was sincere and careful. He was a small man, quite slender and tried bravely to develop a grave face but there was too much youth in him yet.

He picked up Jack's pressure suit, running his hand inside the zipper and wiggling a finger through the small rip in the back. "See those stairs? I haven't

looked at them under a microscope but I'll bet your appendix it's blood. It should be Jack's blood, but I don't see how he lost it, except by osmosis."

I put my suitcase on the floor and sat down on the bench beside him and started to remove my shoes. "He was hurt, wasn't he?"

Dr. Grant sighed again. "His pulse was slow, respiration normal, blood pressure and temperature below normal. I figured this was a reaction. It shows up like that sometimes. Maybe other things dropped his pulse, blood pressure and temperature. Even a cigarette can do it to some people, although it usually runs up the blood pressure. Whiskey slows it down. Then I started to treat the bruise on his back. He didn't have any. Only a little red spot on the right shoulder, right over the scapula. No sign of bleeding."

"How'd the blood get through the skin?" I kept telling myself that I ought to be taking a shower. I had to get those films mailed before the post office closed and Salina was 40 miles away.

"I don't know," said Grant. "After the cabin had holes in it there wasn't any pressure there, and then the hole let the cushioning pressure out of Jack's suit. Jack was in a partial vacuum. Blood might have been sucked out of his skin, but it would not have come out in one spot. His skin would have swollen and burst in many places."

"Ugh!"

"Jack couldn't have lived in that partial vacuum. His blood would have boiled."

I stood up and took off my pants.

"What's more," Grant went on, "he would have blacked out immediately. He couldn't have brought the plane down and he'd have been dead long before he landed."

"But he didn't die."

"No, he had no apparent effects and his skin wasn't broken. And don't tell me it might have been the nose bleed, which Jack tried to tell me. He'd have had a hell of a time sticking his nose into his shoulder blade to get that blood where it is."

Dr. Grant hung the pressure suit in a locker, picked up his medical equipment and put it in a bag and then walked wearily toward the door. "Guess I'll have to talk to Maynard and then I'm going to have a drink," he said.

He disappeared through the door. Maynard would tell him about the egg and save me the trouble. I went into a shower and turned on the water.

I stopped thinking about the china egg and thought of Janet, which was easier and more pleasant although she presented some questions too. I hadn't been able to figure out whether Jack or I was in No. 1 position.

But the egg kept bobbing up in my thoughts in spite of Janet. And finally I got mad thinking about it. The Greeks realized about 23 centuries ago that peo-

ple shouldn't get worked up about trying to find answers. It was a futile task. One of the Greek philosophers, I forgot which, said it was impossible for a man to go faster than his experience. If he didn't know what he was trying to find out, how would he know if he found it? On the other hand, if he knew what he was trying to learn, why was he looking for it and trying to learn it?

But the modern idea is that if you are to learn the truth, you must go beyond the facts. And whether I realized it at this particular moment or not, I must have known subconsciously that we were up against something that had never confronted man before. . . .

I picked Janet up in my Ford convertible at ten minutes after three. She wore a red and blue dirndle dress and a creamy blouse. She had her hair tied down with a red scarf and she looked cool and fresh as springtime.

We chit-chatted as we bounced over the pot-holed blacktop drive toward the east gate where a security cop named Whitaker checked us through.

The trip was breezy, but the sun was hot. We got to Salina about 4:30, and I mailed the films, special delivery, and was assured they'd go out that evening on the U. P. streamliner. Janet had time to look in on some of the store windows and we had sodas at a fountain, these being

luxuries that we couldn't get at the base.

It was enough to spoil our dinner, so we drove over to the swimming pool and watched the youngsters splash around.

We started back about 7:30 o'clock in the evening. It was still daylight, but combines were moving out into the fields. In this part of the state a lot of farmers put floodlights on their combines and harvested at night. It saves a lot of lives that might otherwise be lost through sunstroke.

"The guy that said only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the mid-day sun should have included Kansas wheat farmers a few years ago," I said. "When I was 17, I worked a season in the harvest fields. It was the hardest work I ever did in my life."

"I'd think you would rather have been a cowboy," Janet said.

"I was one once at that," I said laughing.

"A real cowboy?"

"Well, real enough. Then I worked for awhile as a gunsmith and the army got me for a couple of years. Instead of putting me into the ordnance department, or whatever supplies guns, they put me in the signal corps and taught me to use a camera. I came out and worked on a newspaper. Then I bought a second-hand movie camera, figuring to free lance and cashing in on television. I would have starved before Darling hired me, except that a clinic used me to develop X-ray pictures."

She was silent for a time be-

fore she said, "What do you think your films will show about Jack's flight?"

"I hope they show what he hit—whether it's what I think it was, or not," I said.

"Do you think it was a meteor?" she asked.

"Not unless meteors look like china eggs," I said, and told her what I'd found on the plane. "Do you think Jack carried a nest egg in his pocket as a good-luck charm?"

"I know he didn't," Janet said. "He carried my picture."

That sort of stopped me, but Janet was laughing and seemed to think it was funny.

"I'm sure it wasn't a meteor anyhow," I said. "Kansas has quite a record on meteors. More stone and iron meteorites are found in Kansas than all the rest of the world combined, you know. I've found a couple myself and I know what they look like."

Janet was silent, thinking. This was no way to push a romance, so I switched on the radio for mood music. The sun was setting in the west but it still was hot. Nevertheless, I put my arm on the back of her seat and she rested her head on it.

"Bob," she said at last. "There's something awfully funny going on."

"You're telling me."

"I don't mean that egg—or whatever it was. That's going to need a lot of explanation. But I mean the way Jack acted. I talked to one of the mechanics while

I was waiting for you and he told me the way Jack behaved. It wasn't like him to knock a man down."

"He was under pressure."

"He knocked him down. That's what I heard," Janet said flatly. I didn't argue with her, because you can't argue with a pretty girl when she's halfway snuggled in your arms. "Anyhow," she said, "it wasn't like Jack to hit a man. He's always good natured and easy to get along with."

Darn it, why did she have to keep talking about Jack!

"Maybe he was a little off his rocker," I said, hoping she'd let it go at that.

"Supposing—" Janet started to say something and then was silent.

"Supposing what?"

"I know you'll think I'm crazy, Bob," she said.

"Whatever you are, I like it," I said.

"Be serious, Bob," she said. "Supposing there was something up there, like a virus, that got into Jack and made him act—well, different."

I laughed, which was a mistake. She pulled herself up stiffly away from my arm. "I knew you'd laugh," she said.

"Honey," I said, "viruses have to have food like anything else. What do you suppose a virus has for breakfast 42 miles above Kansas soil?"

"Maybe it came from the ground," she said.

"Okay," I said, "maybe it did."

She'd won her argument and

now she came back against my arm. The sun sank out of sight, she snuggled closer. The radio played pretty music and everything was nice.

"I hope Jack gets all right again," she said.

It was a heck of a thing for her to say at that moment, I thought. . . .

It must have been about 9 o'clock when we came within sight of the base.

Warning lights, like little cherries stood out on all of the buildings and on the fence around it. A red beacon shone on the Control Tower. Another cluster of lights marked the water tank on top of the Barracks. And all around was the glare of searchlights.

I slowed down as we approached the east gate and I saw two men standing there. The one in uniform I recognized as Adolph Vanderwal, the security chief. The other, dressed in slacks and a gay blue and red sport shirt, was C. F. Darling himself. "Something's up," I said to Janet.

Darling came lumbering gracelessly to the car. He nodded to Janet, then spoke to me. "Have you seen Ruby?"

"Not since this afternoon." I looked at Janet.

"Not since the test flight," said she.

Darling frowned. "I thought—I hoped she was with you."

"Is she missing?" Janet asked, unnecessarily.

"Yes," he said. "And she didn't check out through the gates. I've hunted everywhere, high and low, and can't find her. She usually drops in after dinner and we watch television."

"Whitaker checked us through when we left," I said. Adolph nodded.

"I know," he said, "but several of the boys drove off after the test. Higgins, Van Haber and Callinan. They're all back now—they drove to Pennington for beer. You were our last chance. She wasn't with any of them." He lowered his voice. "Whitaker's a little lazy, and doesn't always write down the names of everyone in the cars, but I checked him and he said Ruby wasn't with any of the groups that left."

"She might be in her trailer, sleeping or something," Janet said.

"We looked."

"The last time I saw her," I said, "was in your office. I dropped in to see you, C. F., but you were busy. Talking to Willy Plotz."

"That's why we're worried," said Adolph. "Willy's missing, too. You know he was a little upset this afternoon. He made some pretty wild statements to Mr. Darling."

"He had no reason to be angry with Ruby, though," C. F. said.

"We haven't seen her, C. F.," I said.

"Wish you had," said Darling, shaking his head. "Mind if I ride back with you?"

"Hop in," I said.

He walked around the car and slid into the seat beside Janet. "How do you think the pictures turned out, Bob?" he asked.

"Good, I hope. They ought to be developed tomorrow. One of the pilots from your Kansas City plant will fly 'em down tomorrow afternoon."

"Fine."

The trailers came into view. Lights were burning in Dr. Maynard's and Jack Fayburn's. The others were dark. I swung the car into the space between Darling's palace on wheels and Janet's smaller trailer which she shared with Ruby. Darling got out and Janet slid over in the seat to follow him.

Then all hell broke loose. Something seemed to go off in my face and I felt glass splatter on my arm. There was a little round bullet hole in my windshield right in front of the place where Janet had been sitting before she moved to get out.

Janet screamed and I jumped out of the car and found her crouching in Darling's arms beside the machine. Down the blacktop I heard a yell and I saw the security jeep heading our way. Somebody opened the door of the Barracks and came outside. It was one of the mechanics.

I stuck my head up over the edge of the car. I could see several dark forms coming toward us. One of them might be the person who had fired the shot.

I turned to Darling. "Get her out of here," I said.



"Where?" said Darling helplessly.

Janet stood up. "I don't need help," she said. She walked around her trailer and opened the door. I saw the lights flash on and the next moment I heard a scream.

I'd started after Janet when she screamed, but her movement was so quick that she was five or six feet away from me when she stepped through her doorway.

I cleared the distance in a jump and pulled open the trailer screen.

Sitting upright in a chair on the far side of the trailer was a dead man. He was Willy Plotz, but almost unrecognizable. A bullet had gone through his cheek, smashing it, and the entire front of his shirt was splashed with crimson.

"Good God!" said C. F.'s voice behind me. He had come through the door and now he stood looking over my shoulder. Janet stood, stiff and frightened to my left, her hand still poised over the light switch which she had flipped as she came through the door.

I took her arm. "Come on, Janet," I said. "This is no place for you either."

I stepped through the door first. The jeep had stopped beside the door and one of the cops was already getting out.

"What's the trouble?" he asked.

"Take a look," I said, "then call the sheriff."

I took Janet's arm and led her

to my trailer and opened the door. As I flipped on the lights, I felt Janet clutch my arm. No corpse this time, but it still spelled trouble.

From where I stood, I saw debris scattered all over the dark room. Some of my plates had been dragged out into the living quarters and thrown on the floor. Exposed film was lying everywhere. My camera, and well over a thousand dollars' worth of photographic equipment had been ruined.

I closed the venetian blinds and then I stepped into the dark room and looked dismally at the wreckage. I came back, and found Janet, head bowed, seated in a chair.

"Why would anybody do such a thing to me!" I said. Then I suddenly remembered that what had been done to me wasn't quite so bad as what had been done to Willy Plotz.

"And who killed Willy?" I asked myself.

"Do you think Jack did it?" Janet asked.

"Maybe it was self-defense."

"But it still is a terrible thing."

I stepped to the door and examined the lock. It was broken. "Let's go over to the cafeteria," I said. . . .

I found some cups and drew some coffee from the urn. I carried a cup to Janet and sat down beside her.

I heard some shuffling footsteps coming down the corridor

and I held my breath. Then Dr. Maynard came into the room.

"I said, 'Sit down, Doc,' motioning toward a chair.

He got himself a cup of coffee and came over and sat down at our table. He reached into his pocket and brought out the two halves of the china egg shell, which he put down in front of us. "There," he said, "is the Sphinx of modern science."

"Did you find out what they are?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No, and I don't like it."

"Better keep them and look at them some more," I said. "They are not mine."

"I will," he said. "And I've got another set."

"The second one?"

"Yes. I found the second egg shells about an hour ago, between the Barracks and Janet's trailer."

I had stood up under murder and the destruction of the camera equipment in my mobile home, but those things were tangible. This sent tiny, multiple chills up and down my spine. It was more than a bullet hole through my windshield. It was a china egg through the barriers of reality.

Janet caught her breath. "Do you think it had anything to do with — with what happened to Willy Plotz?"

Maynard's eyes were puzzled. "What happened to Willy?"

"He's dead," I said. "Shot."

Maynard studied the broken china egg. "I hadn't heard."

I brought him up to date.

"I think it does have something to do with the egg shells," he said, with a far away look in his eyes. "For a great many years I've been puzzled about something that happened a long time ago that hasn't happened again. I'm afraid it's happening now."

"What, Doc?"

Doc looked at me as if he had not been aware that he'd spoken aloud. "It's the kind of thing that might get a person in a lot of trouble if he talked about—"

"You can trust us," I said.

"It's not a matter of trust," Doc said. "You see we've been conditioned in certain ways. This goes against our conditioning. It goes against what we can believe is real. I hope this thing isn't happening, because it will mean trouble. More trouble than anybody has ever had before."

"What are you talking about?" I asked. "Just what do you mean? What goes on here?"

Dr. Felix Maynard set his coffee cup in its bowl-like saucer and said: "I told you that it isn't a thing a man can discuss off-hand. I may be wrong. I hope I am."

"I think we ought to know, Doc. A man's been killed," I said.

He shook his head. "Facts are believable. This isn't. An intelligent man doesn't look at something he doesn't quite understand and then announce that he has made a discovery. You have to examine the evidence first.



The interior was a shambles created by desperate search.

Only by careful investigation can you be sure of anything and know whether it's good or bad, or even if it's new."

"All right, Doc," I said. "Let's examine the facts."

"You told Janet about the china egg?" he asked me. I nodded and he went on. "I looked at the fragments, Bob. My equipment is limited and I couldn't make exhaustive tests. I couldn't find out what they're made of. It's a strange substance. It's not calcareous, like a bird's egg. It's not a reptile or fish egg. It's not a real china egg, like you'd buy in a feed store."

I started to say something, but Doc was wound up and when he got to talking, nobody else had a chance.

"But something, maybe it's a hunch, makes me think it is an egg. Maybe it's the rather odd series of events that have taken place today, winding up with the murder of Willy Plotz. It might have been the container for something not yet born."

"Are you trying to dream up a monster, Doc?"

"What do you mean—monster? If you mean something unusual, outside our experience, yes. If you mean a freak, a caricature of something that already exists, the answer is no."

"Go ahead," I said. "I'm listening."

"I've said too much already," Doc said. "I'll have to separate the facts from some rather flimsy, unsupported beliefs. Like

everyone else, I'm apt to get them confused."

We waited, while he got things straight in his mind.

"I used a Geiger counter on the fragments and found them slightly radioactive. That's enough to cause a lot of speculation, because in spite of nuclear advances, we don't know very much about radioactivity. We do know that most natural radioactive elements are heavy. This is not. But it doesn't follow that this was manufactured. The fragments are very hard. I had to use a hammer to chip off enough for microscopic study. The structure isn't exactly crystalline, nor is it amorphous, but a little of both."

He paused and sighed. "Those are the facts. To them we can add the strange appearance of the egg shells. The holes in the cockpit covering of the XDW-49. Jack's odd behavior after he landed. The failure of Dr. Grant to find any sign of broken skin on Jack, yet there was blood, which must have been Jack's, on the pressure suit. Then Willy Plotz was killed."

"Don't forget that Ruby Cascade has disappeared and there's a bullet hole in the windshield of my convertible," I reminded him.

"Ruby's disappearance might well be tied up with the second egg. But it was a real bullet, no doubt, that broke your windshield and a real one killed Willy Plotz."

"Where did the egg come from?" Janet asked.

"I can offer three possibilities. It might have come from outer space. It might have come from the earth. Or it might be native to the region where it first made its appearance—the ionosphere."

"That doesn't tell us anything," I said.

"No, it doesn't. The big question isn't where it comes from, or what it is, but whether the shells, or what they contained, are dangerous to us."

"You think something was inside?"

He nodded. "I think so. I'm just guessing, of course. And I don't think it was harmless."

"You think that whatever was in the egg might have been—alive?"

"It's according to what you mean by life."

"Golly, Doc," I said, "there sure can't be any question about that. Either a thing is alive, or it isn't."

"Scientists often duck that issue," he said. "Have you ever heard the phrase 'Life as we know it'?"

Yes, I'd heard it. Scientists say that Jupiter doesn't contain life *as we know it*. Of course, it could have life as we don't know it.

"You mean, the egg might have contained a *different* kind of life?" Janet asked.

He spoke in a low tone. "Perhaps. And that's why I say this isn't the kind of thing a person can talk about without getting into trouble. A different kind of

life is beyond human experience and we can't conceive of it. Even suggesting it, might stir up emotions due to conditioning. When emotions get the upper hand in a man, he's beyond reason."

"I'm not emoting, Doc," I said, "but I still don't believe it."

"But there is a possibility and that possibility must be examined. The fact that the egg was 42 miles above the earth is a pretty difficult thing to swallow. We'll know the truth when we see your films. I know films can be doctored, but I don't think you'd have a good reason to enter into a conspiracy of that sort."

"Not when I've been trying to find out answers myself," I said.

"Let's not talk about it any more," said Janet. "We don't seem to be getting anywhere and my head's swimming."

We left the cafeteria and walked down the corridor to the outside door and joined the crowd that hung in the shadows of the Barracks. Adolph had some of his cops standing around Janet's trailer and I saw the headlights of two cars approaching. The murmur of voices stopped and the crowd watched the cars turn and pull into the space between Darling's trailer and Janet's. A big man, at least six feet tall and about 45 years old stepped out of the first one. This would be the sheriff. I remembered his name, Clay Rancy, of Pennington. His shirt tail was partly out and his eyes were watery, like a man who had been asleep. In a country where the

population rises with the sun, it was past bedtime.

One of the security cops directed him toward Janet's trailer and Sheriff Rancy waved his hand to the second car. "This way, Doc," he said. That would be Doc Bundy, the county coroner. Adolph followed them to the trailer. At the door they paused, while Adolph talked to them in low tones, apparently briefing the sheriff on what he knew about the case. When Adolph finished, the coroner asked a couple of questions, which Adolph answered. Then they opened the door and solemnly stepped inside to inspect the body of Willy Plotz.

I turned to Dr. Maynard. "How much of your theory will you tell the sheriff?"

"All the facts," he replied. "The sheriff can make his own speculations. I have enough to cope with my own."

After a few minutes the trailer door opened and Sheriff Rancy and Adolph came out. They walked toward the Barracks door where we stood.

"I can talk to some of the fellows," Adolph was saying. "Might save you time."

"I've got plenty of time," the sheriff said. "Besides, I like to find out things for myself."

Adolph nodded and said, "Clay, this is Bob Reeve, our photographer, and Miss Janet Deslie, one of the secretaries. They discovered the body. Mr. Darling was with them."

"Where's Darling?" the sheriff asked.

"Over in his trailer, I guess," said Adolph. "Shall I get him?"

"I'll see him later." He turned to me. "Did you see the body first?"

"A second or two after Janet," I said. "I went into the trailer right behind her."

"What were you doing in the trailer?" The question was directed at both of us.

"It's mine," Janet said. "I live there with Ruby Cascade."

"Where's she?"

"I don't know. I've been away all evening with Bob. We just got home. We picked Mr. Darling up at the gate and came right to the trailer. I got out, went in and turned on the light and saw the body."

"Then what did you do?"

"She screamed," I said.

"Let her tell it," said Sheriff Rancy.

Janet went over her story and the sheriff wanted to know where we went in Salina and who we'd seen there. I told him. Just as I finished Adolph came up and pulled the sheriff aside and whispered in his ear. The sheriff followed Adolph over to my car—where they examined the bullet hole in the windshield.

Presently they came back and the sheriff said, "Got any idea why somebody took a shot at you?"

"What makes you think they were shooting at me?"

"Weren't they?"

"It was right through the mid-

dle of the windshield. Right at the spot Janet had been sitting in. She'd moved to get out of the car."

The sheriff turned and looked at her. "All right," he said, "why would anybody want to shoot you?"

"It wasn't Jack," she said. She had no reason to say that but she knew that Jack was the obvious suspect since he'd had the fuss with Willy.

"You like Jack?" the sheriff asked.

"Everyone likes Jack," said Janet stubbornly.

"You'd been out with him a few times, maybe?"

"We went to some movies together. Swimming a couple of times."

"But you were with this fellow—" he jerked his head toward me. "Maybe Jack was sore about it."

He had no reason to be jealous. We were just friends."

"I reckon I'd better see this Fayburn fellow. Is he around?"

Jack was nowhere among those standing near the Barracks and he hadn't been in the cafeteria. I turned and looked down the line. There's a light in his trailer."

"Take me," said the sheriff gruffly.

I smiled at Janet. "Stay with Dr. Maynard till I get back," I said.

The coroner came out of the trailer and the sheriff asked, "Can we move the body?"

Coroner Bundy nodded. "I'll

have to perform an autopsy to get the bullet. It lodged in his brain. Tomorrow all right for the inquest?"

"Depends on what we turn up tonight, Doc. Better make it day after tomorrow—Thursday."

"I've got an operation Thursday morning. Make it Thursday afternoon," said the coroner.

"Okay," said the sheriff. "I'll round up a jury and witnesses. You tell the county attorney."

The coroner nodded and went to his car and Rancy said "Now let's see what kind of a story Fayburn tells."

"Want to stop in my trailer first?" I asked.

"Why?"

I told him about my smashed camera equipment. "Maybe you can get some fingerprints from the fragments."

He said, "Son, I run a small-town sheriff's office. Sure, I got a fingerprint outfit at the jail, but I don't know how to get 'em off anything. Tried it once and smeared the whole job. If the chicken thief hadn't confessed we'd never convicted him."

We reached Jack's trailer and the sheriff pounded on the door. It opened and Jack Fayburn stood in the doorway dressed in his pajamas. "What do you want?" he snapped.

"We want to talk to you," said Sheriff Rancy.

"I don't want to talk to you. I've had a hard day, I'm tired. I want to sleep."

"Jack," I said, "this is Sheriff Rancy from Pennington. Willy

Plotz has just been shot and Rancy wants to talk to you."

Jack's blank expression didn't change. I'd been wondering what made Jack look different and suddenly I realized what it was.

He didn't blink his eyes. Come to think of it, when I talked to Ruby for that brief minute in the afternoon, she hadn't blinked either. . . .

#### 4. FIRST MAN TO DIE

THE sheriff broke the silence. "Naturally, Mr. Fayburn, I can't come in your trailer without a warrant—'less you invite me," he said. "But a man's been shot and I understand you had a little fuss with him this afternoon. If you lock me out, or refuse to answer questions, it might look a little—well—funny."

"If it's funny, why don't you laugh," said Jack, giving one of his dead-pan smiles. "But go ahead and ask any questions you like."

The sheriff's voice took off its velvet cover. "Where you been this evening, Fayburn?"

"Right here in my trailer most of the time. I told you I had a hard day. I'm tired."

"You say 'most of the evening'. Did you go out at all?"

"Sure. I went to the Barracks for dinner."

"Did you see Willy Plotz?"

"Not at dinner. I saw him later. After I got back. He—"

"Wait a minute. What time was that?"

"I don't know exactly. I ate about 7. Must have been after 7:30 or a little before 8. I didn't notice the time."

"Okay. What happened when you saw Willy?"

Jack moved a step back. "Why don't you come in?"

"Sure." The sheriff mounted the steps. I wasn't invited, but I followed. Jack motioned to some chairs, and I took one. The sheriff remained standing, and so did Jack.

"Okay," Jack said. "Now what was your question?"

"About Willy. What happened when you saw him?"

"Oh, yes. I came right back to my trailer. Willy came over from the hangar when he saw me. He was very nasty. Said he had some things to settle with me. We talked a little."

"What about? You don't have to answer me, you know. You got Constitutional rights."

"I know my rights. He said I knocked him down without any reason and he was going to take it out of my hide."

"Did you knock him down without reason?"

"He irritated me. He said I was hurt when I wasn't. Insisted on it."

"You weren't hurt?" I asked. The sheriff looked at me with a warning light in his eyes. Jack was talking freely enough and he was afraid I would say something to shut him up.

"Of course not."



"Dr. Grant said there was blood on your pressure suit. But he couldn't find a place where the skin was broken."

Jack laughed mirthlessly. "Then Grant has a mystery to solve. All I know is that I wasn't hurt. I didn't feel anything."

"All right, you weren't hurt," the sheriff said impatiently. "Tell what happened between you and Willy Plotz."

"I told Willy that I was upset and I hit him harder than I intended. I didn't know a little slap would knock him down. He got madder and when I told him to take a walk he swung at me."

"Hit you?"

"I blocked with my left. But he still came on so I gave him a push with both hands. Wasn't much of a push. Just a tiny little shove."

"What happened then?"

"He fell down."

"Just a little push, and he fell down? Did he trip?"

"No. He didn't trip," said Jack. "He just couldn't stand up."

"Looks to me like it was more than a little shove. Then what?"

"He reached into his hip pocket and pulled out a gun."

The sheriff's hands raised a little and his right was very close to the butt of the .38-caliber revolver in the holster at his side. "You grabbed the gun, of course?" he asked.

"No," said Jack. "Didn't have time!"

"Then what happened?"

"He shot me."

The sheriff blinked his eyes. "Listen, Fayburn. I didn't come here to listen to jokes. Don't tell me he killed you!"

"Oh, no. He shot me here." He pulled open his pajama shirt and stripped it off. On the left side of his chest was a little red spot. It looked like a discoloration of the skin.

The sheriff looked at it, then at Jack. "What kind of a Mother Goose rhyme are you singing, Fayburn? No bullet did that."

"Okay. You believe it didn't. I say it did."

"You're a damn liar."

"I won't get mad, if that's what you want. Why don't you try shooting me and see what a bullet does," Jack said softly.

"Why don't you try telling the truth for a change?"

"What do you think is the truth?"

"I'll tell you. Willy pulled a gun. Maybe he pulled the trigger. Or you might have grabbed it. Anyhow it went off. Maybe nobody heard the shot. I can't find anybody that did. Anyhow, Willy was killed, so you parked the body in the women's trailer. God knows why."

"The only truth in the entire statement you made is that Willy pulled a gun and pulled the trigger," said Jack. "I don't have to lie to you. You can't do anything to me."

"Maybe it *was* self-defense," said the sheriff. "But if it was, you'd better give me a straight story."

"I did."

"What kind of a gun was it?" the sheriff asked. "A .22?"

Jack shrugged. "I didn't notice."

"Where is it now?"

Jack grinned with his mouth, but his eyes were unblinking. "It's in my bedroom. Want to see it?"

"Get it."

Jack half-turned and started toward the front of the trailer.

"No," said the sheriff. "I'd better get it." He reached into his hip pocket and drew out some handcuffs. "You'd better wear these."

Jack turned, his lips still drawn into a Mona Lisa grin. "Do you intend to take me to jail, Sheriff?"

"You're dang tootin'."

He walked up to Jack and Jack gave him a push. It wasn't more than a push from appearance, but it sent the sheriff the full length of the trailer and banged him up against the electric ice box.

The sheriff's eyes sparked rage and he reached for his revolver.

"Don't draw it!" came a shrill voice.

The curtains of Jack's sleeping quarters were pulled aside. Standing in the opening, leveling a small gun at the sheriff was Ruby Cascade. She was still dressed in her brief bathing suit, covered with the beach cape.

The gun was one of those little .32-caliber pistols you usually find in abundance in pawn shops,

in states where it is legal to sell guns. These little jobs are good for burglars, sneak thieves and suicides, but not worth much for any other purpose. They go off with a little crack that might be mistaken for a motor backfire. It was easy to see how it could have been fired twice near Jack's trailer, which was farthest from the Barracks, without causing much attention. Particularly if the security patrol was far away and the crew was indoors cooling off under air conditioning.

"I'll take yours, Sheriff," Jack said, grinning. He walked forward, taking care not to put himself between Ruby and the sheriff, and pulled the Smith & Wesson from its holster.

"Damn you," said Sheriff Rancy. "You're just makin' it tough for yourself. You'll never get away with it now. But if you'd let things lie, you might have plead self-defense. Now you are making a big thing out of it."

Jack held the .38 on the sheriff. He turned sideways and gestured with his head toward Ruby. "Come on, sweetheart," he said, "let's go."

Ruby lowered her weapon and moved across the room and out the door. She had a wiggle in her walk. Jack looked at me. "No hard feelings, Bob?"

"I think you're making a mistake, Jack," I said.

"You'll learn differently," he replied. He stepped through the door after Ruby.

"Crazy damned lunatic," said

the sheriff. "He won't even get off the base."

He stepped to the door. I followed him and we saw Jack and Ruby walking off toward the control tower.

At that moment a voice called and Darling came into the light of one of the field searchlights.

"Ruby!" he shouted. "Where have you been? I've been looking all over for you!"

Ruby stopped. She turned and raised her arm. Her hand held the .32, which would kill, even if it wasn't the best gun on earth. In fact, it probably had killed Willy Plotz.

She was drawing a bead on Darling.

Jack reached out and snatched the gun from her hand. "Don't be a fool, Ruby! We need his money."

Darling saw the gun and stopped in his tracks.

Ruby and Jack broke into a run, and soon disappeared in the shadows of the Barracks.

The sheriff and I came up to Darling.

"She was going to shoot me!" he said, in a stunned voice.

"Where'd they go?" demanded the sheriff. He turned his head trying to get a glimpse of them.

"I can't understand what got into her," Darling said.

"C. F.," I said, "Jack practically admitted he shot Willy. And Ruby is protecting him."

The sheriff started toward the Barracks and I followed.

"I'll never trust a woman again," Darling wailed after us.

Adolph met us at the doorway. "The undertaker just came from Pennington to get the body," he said.

"To hell with the undertaker! Where'd that woman go?"

"What woman?"

"Ruby," I said. "Ruby Cascade. Jack Fayburn was with her. They came this way."

"Why didn't you stop them, Sheriff?" Adolph asked.

"Dammit! They took my gun. They've also got the gun that killed Willy Plotz. Fayburn practically admitted it."

Adolph's lower jaw gaped. He collected himself and said, "I didn't see them."

The sheriff was tense as a steel spring. "Station men at each gate and shoot anybody that tries to get out," he said.

"There are already men there," Adolph said. "And what about the undertaker and the coroner?"

"The coroner's already gone. Let the undertaker go, but everybody else stays."

"Okay," said Adolph and he moved off.

The sheriff turned to me. "I'll round up some boys for a search party. Want to come along?"

"Not unless you need me," I said. "I think Janet needs somebody with her."

Darling came up behind us.

The sheriff turned to him. "Where would they be likely to hide?" the sheriff said.

"I don't know," said Darling.

"Got any extra guns?"

"Why, yes," Darling said. "Mr. Vanderwal can find one for you. But you're not going to shoot anyone, are you?"

"I'm going to put them in jail, one way or another," the sheriff said.

"I forbid you to shoot them," said Darling. "Jack is an invaluable employee. Miss Cascade is—well, she's a woman."

"Listen, Mister," said the sheriff, "I don't care if you're C. F. Darling or who. If I'm gonna be reelected county sheriff, I gotta catch them. They took my gun. Every dad-blamed man-jack in Kansas will laugh at me, if I don't."

"But you've got no right to shoot them," said Darling. "Unless they shoot at you."

"That ain't no way to survive till election time," said the sheriff. He moved off toward the Barracks to organize his posse.

I left Darling to search for Dr. Maynard and Janet. I found them in the trailer Grant and Maynard occupied. Dr. Grant was with them and I told what had happened.

"So Willy shot him and the wound healed," Maynard said. He seemed to believe it and I wondered if he was nuts.

"It would explain why the skin wasn't broken when I examined him," said Grant. "But how it explains it, is more than I learned in medical school."

"Regeneration?" asked Maynard.

"Maynard," said Grant, "re-

generation is a limited function in human beings. Bones, fingernails, hair and so on are about the only parts of our anatomy that have it."

"Harlan," said Maynard, "you go too damn much by your medical textbooks. You won't find any cases there like what's happening tonight."

"I know. The blood on Jack's pressure suit bothered me. Just what do you make of it?"

"Do you know what life is?"

"Well, no. But—well, do you?"

"No. But I have my theories. And I don't lay down laws for life to obey. Life is a special case. The trouble with you is that you think everything has a diagnosis."

"Nonsense. Medical science runs up against things every day that it doesn't understand. Sure. This is different. But how different? I'll admit I haven't seen everything. Maybe certain humans have regenerative powers as a throwback. Babies have been born with gill-slits, you know. It's a possibility."

"I don't know how different it is," said Maynard. "But when I find out, I'll tell you."

Janet rose from the chair she had been using. "I ought to get some rest," she said.

"You haven't got a place to sleep," I said. "Why don't you use my trailer?"

She looked at me questioningly, then said. "What will you do, Bob?"

"It's warm, as if you didn't know. I'll spread some blankets

outside. You need a bodyguard at your doorstep anyhow."

She hesitated. "It's kind of you. All right, if you're sure you won't mind."

"Not in the least."

We said our good nights to Maynard and Grant and left. It was after midnight by Janet's watch, when I took her into the trailer. The place was still a mess and I made my apologies, but Janet said she was too tired to notice. I got some blankets and carried them outside.

Dr. Maynard came up while I was spreading the blankets. In his hands he carried a small 20-gauge shotgun. "You might need this, Bob," he said. "I don't know if Jack can regenerate after a shotgun blast or not, but it's better than a pistol. Careful, it's loaded. But the safety's on."

I took the gun and laid it at the edge of my blankets. "Thanks. Hope I don't need it."

"I hope so, too," Doc said. "Funny. I brought the gun along thinking I'd shoot a few jack-rabbits. But there don't seem to be many in this part of Kansas."

He said good night and went back to his trailer. I smoothed out the blankets. Then I sat down and took off my shoes.

Maynard said there weren't many jackrabbits here and he was right. Not many years ago they were all over, now they were few. Cars on the highways had taken a greater toll than hunters. I've seen Kansas roads speckled with rabbit carcasses with buzzards and crows getting fat with-

out having to work for their meals.

The rabbit had put up a good battle against civilization and man, but cars were more than he could handle. People regard the rabbit as a timid creature, because he runs and hides. But those are weapons. When cornered, I've seen a rabbit stand his ground and battle a large dog. The dog usually won, but the rabbit was game to the end.

The rabbit always fought, but in many ways, because he had many enemies. Hawks, coyotes and disease. But in a battle for survival the rabbit ran, hid and multiplied—those were his best weapons.

The buffalo, another native of Kansas, was less fortunate. The bison—which is the correct name for the beast—lost because of a lack of weapons. He was good until faced with a change. He had been supreme, the king of the plains. He multiplied and he was sturdy. He was immune to most livestock diseases, and too large to be killed easily. Only crippled buffalo fell to coyotes. Indians, who had better weapons, had to use special tactics to kill him.

Then came white men with guns and transportation. In ten years, from 1865 to 1875, the great herds were reduced to a few scattered bunches. Possibly thirty million animals were killed.

Horace Greeley saw a herd estimated at a million. And there

are records of another great herd twenty-five miles wide and fifty miles long which would contain two million animals, if it had only ten beasts to the acre.

At the turn of the century, the only surviving buffalo were those in parks and preserves. Today you can kill a buffalo, of course, but the fee is \$450, which includes deep freezing the meat for shipping to your home—rather an expensive sport.

Those were two wars for survival of species that have been fought in Kansas, and there are fossil records of others in the state. Man has never really been put to a test. But now as I prepared to settle down on my blankets, I had an eerie feeling that the test was near.

Suddenly the trailer door opened. Janet stood in the doorway looking down at me. I stood up as she came toward me.

"I'm afraid," she whispered.

"No need to be," I said, feeling none of the reassurance I gave. "I'll be right outside all night and I've got Doc Maynard's gun—" I pointed to the shotgun which was dimly visible in the light of the moon.

She moved close and my arms crept about her. She lifted her arms around my neck.

"We may not be alive tomorrow!" she whispered.

The kiss told me one thing I wanted to know. Even if he could soak up bullets, Jack Fayburn didn't have what I had as far as Janet was concerned. Or maybe I was kidding myself. . . .

## 5. THE SECOND EGG

**B**EFORE dawn many things had been done, little accomplished. Sheriff Clay Rancy and his posse of security cops had searched the hangar, all of the trailers, the control tower, the garage, and explored the empty fuel tanks on the far side of the airstrip.

Searchlights had been beamed through the two-foot area beneath the Barracks floors. No trace of the missing couple was found. Sheriff Rancy got a ladder and poked open the ceiling trap door in the upstairs corridor, to make sure no one was hiding in the stuffy, musty attic. The cars parked along the black-top drive were searched.

Ruby Cascade and Jack Fayburn had seemingly vanished.

"We'll find them. Maybe in an obvious place where we didn't think it was worthwhile to look," the sheriff said.

They were in the obvious place. However, no one, excepting Dr. Maynard possibly, had an inkling at that time of what would have been obvious for them.

A few of us slept. The mechanics, who had work to do on the XDW-49, were in the dormitory. With them were Pat Callinan, Higgins, Herman Bagley, and some of the security cops who would have to carry on through the daylight hours the next day. I think Darling slept in his trailer, although he was up frequent-

ly through the night. Maynard and Dr. Grant were in their trailer and I presumed they, too, had a disturbed night.

Soon after 7 o'clock I rose and knocked on the door of the trailer and found Janet gone. I put on my shoes and carried the shotgun to the cafeteria. It was a pump gun, a Winchester model 12. I assumed, since Maynard had told me he planned to go rabbit hunting, that it was loaded with No. 5 or 6 shot.

The sheriff was there, sitting with Janet. There were a couple of security cops at another table in the back of the room.

Herman was up, handling the breakfast orders and I got some scrambled eggs from him and joined the sheriff.

Janet looked tired and the sheriff was grouchy. "Why didn't you tell me about this china egg?" he said to me.

"You didn't ask," I said, seating myself. "Has Janet been bringing you up-to-date?"

The sheriff glanced at Janet. "I had a chat with Dr. Maynard last night. He sort of let on that he thought there might be a germ or something in it."

"A germ or something?"

"And Miss Deslie, here, thinks it's some kind of a varmint from outer space."

"It's all guesswork," I said. "None of us know very much about it. We gave you the facts, the rest is pure speculation."

"Humph. You don't need a sheriff, you need a curator of a museum." He studied his coffee

cup. "Do you reckon that Fayburn was telling the truth last night when he said Plotz shot him and the bullet didn't even leave a hole?"

"Sheriff," I said, "you're asking me to form an opinion on something I don't know anything about. Sure, I'll give you an answer, but remember it's me that's giving it. I think Jack was shot. I think there's something inside him that seals him up like a puncture-proof tire. That's as good an idea as anything anybody can give you. Besides, it may be true. A lot of damn funny things have been happening since yesterday afternoon and it's not taxing my credulity too much to believe in it."

The sheriff made an impolite noise with his lips. Then he reached into his shirt pocket, took out a package of gum and unwrapped a stick. He put the remainder of the package back into his pocket and stuck the gum in his mouth.

"I'm dang near ready to believe it myself," he said. "The trouble with you, boy, is that you don't know enough big words. A scientist can describe a man with puncture-proof skin in words you can't understand and he makes it stick. We say the same thing with one-cylinder lingo and we're like a bank president that's got holes in his shoes. Nobody trusts us. I like gum," he said. "Keeps my teeth clean. I ain't had a tooth filled in seven years." He turned to Janet. "Want a stick?"

"No," said Janet. "I'll have to go to work pretty soon. Mr. Mall doesn't approve of gum-chewing secretaries."

"See what I mean?" said the sheriff. "If I could sell gum the way ads sell toothpaste, Mall would insist on her chewing it." He turned to me. "Want some gum?"

"I see my dentist twice a year," I said.

The sheriff pushed back his chair. "Guess I'll find a place to grab forty winks." He got up and walked toward the door. "Better keep that gun with you," he said, as he went out the door.

"Do you really think Jack can get well right away from a bullet wound?" Janet asked.

"I don't know," I said. I remembered his defiance of the sheriff. Even his escape hadn't seemed to be a retreat. So far as we knew, he was still on the base.

But if Jack had been shot by Willy, where he said he'd been shot, the bullet would have passed near his heart. It would have been fatal.

The implication was that Jack was no longer a man, but something else. And there was that business about his strength. The sheriff had been knocked across a trailer with no more effort than a gentle push. That added up to more than ordinary strength.

I turned to Janet. "Do you think that the same thing happened to Ruby that happened to Jack?"

"I don't know."

"You lived with Ruby. You

ought to know her pretty well. What kind of a girl was she?"

Janet smiled. "There was nothing mysterious about Ruby. She wasn't deep. She liked nice clothes and wanted men to admire her."

"Do you think she had a yen for Jack?"

"She liked Jack. Everybody liked Jack. But I don't think she ever made a pass at him."

"She couldn't have slipped out with him on the sly?"

"I'm sure she didn't."

"How can you be sure?"

"Well . . ." she hesitated. "Of course, I can't be sure, but I don't think she was the sneaky type."

"You mean Jack went for you and she wouldn't poach on what she considered your territory?"

She grinned. "You dog. Yes, if you must know. That's probably why I'm pretty sure Ruby and Jack were just speaking acquaintances."

Janet looked at the clock on the wall above the kitchen door. "Ye gods!" she said. "It's almost eight. I'll have to go to work." She sprung up suddenly. "'Bye, now. See you later, Bob."

"Watch yourself," I said.

Men were coming into the cafeteria now for breakfast. I'd sort of planned to wait for Maynard, but as I saw Darling enter, I decided to leave. Darling always regarded his employees as one happy family and his paternal attitude was a little irritating at times. . . .



Maynard was in his lab. The china eggs were on the shelf in front of him and I knew he'd been studying them.

"Brought your gun back," I said. "Thanks."

He took the gun and put it on a table. I sat down on a stool beside the bench where he'd been working.

"Anything new?"

He shook his head. "We've got to have more facts, Bob. But I'd like to do a little speculating."

"About what?"

"Who was shooting at whom last night?"

"You mean the bullet through my windshield?"

He nodded. "Was it Jack, or was it Ruby? Were you the target, or was it Janet?"

"Or Darling?" I asked. "He was in my car, too."

"Yes, it might have been Darling. But I don't think so. Jack spared Darling last night when Ruby leveled a gun at him."

"Sheriff tell you that?"

He nodded again. "I got to studying the problem after I talked to him. He's sure that Jack shot Willy Plotz. He might have. I think it was Ruby. I also think that Ruby shot at Janet, not you, last night."

"She had nothing to fear from Janet. Or me either."

"You're confusing the past and the present." Remember, we're constructing a special hypothesis dealing with the contents of a china egg. I believe it contained something alive—a special kind of life—that has

succeeded in some way in dominating two people. Like I said, we need more facts, but still we can speculate.

"In all forms of life, reproduction of species is one of the prime objectives. Life can be permanent only if it renews itself. As fast as one organism wears out it must be replaced by another. And organisms cannot replace themselves alone. Genes and chromosomes might become damaged or crippled and harmful characteristics might doom a species. Therefore there must be an infusion of two sets of characteristics so that, theoretically anyhow, the composite will be sound."

"That's why there were two eggs, eh? Male and female."

"Yes," said Doc. "That's also why the second egg made no move to dominate anyone till it found a female. There were quite a few men around the XDW-49 after Jack landed. Half a dozen mechanics, Darling, Dr. Grant, two security cops and yourself." Dr. Maynard counted them off on his fingers. "That's eleven people. If the second china egg had been—well, indiscriminate—it could have—infected any one of you. I'm hampered by a choice of words here because we don't know exactly what took place."

"So you think it picked Ruby. Why not Janet?"

"Ruby was available, probably."

I remembered now that Janet

had gone to the trailer to fix up for her date with me that afternoon. That fact might have saved her from whatever fate had come to Ruby. No doubt Ruby had waited near where we left her till Jack rode by in his jeep. The china egg might have sensed through Jack that she was just what it had been waiting for. This fact would indicate some sort of communication between them.

"Okay," I said. "Now how does this have a bearing on the shooting of Willy Plotz and at me? Or Janet?"

"In any organism there is a strong bond between the sexes. Sometimes it makes its appearance only during mating, other times it exists throughout life. I don't have to go into details. Everyone knows this."

"It's stronger in some people than in others."

"We don't have to talk about people. Some birds and many animals form lifelong unions. It's instinctive. Psychologists have tried to explain it and have come up with a lot of words that add up to the same definition.

"The two china eggs were mates. When one dominated Jack, and the other dominated Ruby, Jack and Ruby became mates. Each became very important to the other, no matter what relationship existed between them before this infection.

"Ruby's infection must have taken place soon after Jack landed. The fact that I found the egg-shell fragments much later does

not mean anything. They might have lain there for several hours unobserved. At any rate both of the china eggs, or their contents—"

"Call them china eggs," I said, "I know what you mean."

"Both of the eggs were in a new environment. How they carried out the occupation is one of the things we must find out. But no doubt there was a period of confusion, accounting for Jack's surly attitude, and Ruby's behavior when you met her in Darling's office. The eggs were uncertain of their capabilities. Perhaps they had trouble carrying out their occupation, or infection. There may have been resistance, maybe there was none.

"At any rate, each was wary of anything that might threaten their existence and also the welfare of their mates. While Jack was being examined by Dr. Grant, Ruby lurked in Darling's office. As soon as Jack went to his trailer, Ruby followed secretly and stayed there.

"They still had not gained full control of the bodies of their hosts, or perhaps they had not learned how to operate these bodies efficiently.

"Late in the day, after sunset probably, Willy Plotz appeared on the scene. We have no reason to doubt the story Jack told the sheriff on this point. Willy was unreasonable and determined to get even with Jack for the indignity he'd suffered that afternoon. Willy also had a gun. The

sheriff learned from some of the mechanics that the gun was Willy's.

"Through Ruby the egg that occupied her sensed that the gun was a deadly weapon. No doubt the egg by this time had a pretty direct control of the real Ruby's thoughts and emotions, and in the brief struggle in which Jack was shot, Ruby's foremost thought was for Jack's safety. Ruby seized the gun from Willy—you know about the almost superhuman strength Jack had and probably Ruby has as much. She shot Willy right there to prevent his harming Jack."

"The organism in Jack proceeded to repair the damage. The human body is a remarkable machine, Bob. It has the capacity to save itself from death but it works slowly. A man can recover from serious injury to his heart if the heart can continue to function. Time is needed and our bodies aren't capable of speeding up the repair process fast enough in the case of a fatal wound. However, there's a reserve of strength that sometimes can be called upon. We have brain power we never use. Muscular power that can be used only under duress and extreme emotion. The egg knew how to call upon these reserves and it patched up Jack, just as it had kept him alive in high altitudes when it first pierced Jack's skin. By the time the sheriff saw Jack last night, his bullet wound had healed. When Dr. Grant treated Jack yesterday afternoon, the scar

from the entrance of this organism into his body had healed."

"Doc, you make a great case out of it, but you've still got to admit that we don't know," I said.

"It's our working hypothesis," said Maynard. "Now the shot at you. While Jack was repairing the damage to himself, Ruby sensed that Willy's body was a danger to Jack's safety. Her human brain tipped her off that homicide meant arrest. That spelled trouble to her. She carried the body to her trailer, taking pains not to be seen."

"Why her trailer? Why not one of the others?"

"Possibly to frame Janet," said Maynard. "Her actions might not be logical, since there was an adjustment going on in her mind. But I think her inner jealousy of Janet caused her to take a shot at Janet. Jack and Ruby—the new Jack and Ruby—controlled the memories of the old Jack and Ruby. Ruby knew that Jack had a strong emotional attachment for Janet. Ruby was afraid it would linger. Ruby did not want to lose her mate."

"So that's why she shot at Janet!"

"Right. She probably had an original plan to get Janet blamed for Willy's death. But you came up with Janet and Darling in your car. It caused a shift in plan—it would be easier to eliminate Janet altogether than to let the processes of law do it."

"Hold on, Doc. Wouldn't suspi-

cion revert back to Ruby if Janet were killed?"

"I told you there was confusion in her mind. She had an old standard and a new standard. There was bound to be conflict. Possibly she realized while she was preparing to frame Janet that she was immune to ordinary punishment. She had powers that ordinary people don't have. So why go to a lot of bother? A dead Janet was just as satisfactory for her purposes as a Janet in jail. All she wanted to do was to eliminate a rival."

"The first triangle in the history of a new form of life," I remarked.

"But not life as we know it," Doc said. "Remember, this thing we're up against is different. I can't put my finger on it yet, but I know I will."

"It can't be too different," I said. "The situation is as old as two reptiles fighting over a mate. Did you tell this to the sheriff? Does he know?"

"Parts of it. I don't think he believed it or understood it. But he's coming up for reelection and he's desperate. He'll solve it my way or his way, whichever works out. Maybe his way is the best one after all."

"He's mad as a hornet about Jack taking his gun," I said. "Sheriff Rancy has a score to settle with Jack, just like Willy Plotz had."

"The sheriff's a different kind of man," said Maynard. "He may not be well-educated, but he's got sense and a pretty high standard.

He'll do his duty, come what may. He's admirable, in fact."

"We've done a lot of theorizing," I said, "but we can't get anywhere sitting around talking. We've got to find Jack and Ruby, or figure out a way to beat the thing that's got them."

"I know, Bob," said Maynard. "That's what I had in mind. Jack was a good friend of yours and I don't believe he'd regard you as a menace. Maybe I know where they are and maybe Jack would talk to you, if you want to take the risk of talking to him."

"You know where they are?"

He nodded. "But I don't know what he'd do to you, Bob."

"You mean, I might catch what he's got?"

In the sense that it can be caught like a disease, yes. But this isn't a disease, exactly. It's nothing like what we know about. Still, you might not be in danger—yet. To infect you, would mean reproduction—still not in the sense that we know it. That takes time."

"For something that we don't know about, you seem to be well informed on it," I said, ambiguously.

"Bob," said Maynard, "I have a very special philosophy of life. In my own mind, I've dealt with this problem for years. My psychology is different. I foresaw that some day man would meet a different kind of life. I sensed what kind would be dangerous. Jack and Ruby answer the specifications. I don't know every-

thing about them, but I've figured out a sequence of events that seems logical, if they are what we think they are. We must act now, because this is the vulnerable point in their development. The longer we wait, the less chance we'll have to win this battle for survival. I wouldn't ask you to talk to Jack, unless I felt it was extremely important to test my theories. But I must warn you, you'll be in the greatest danger—not only physically, but spiritually."

I thought spiritually was a strange term for Maynard to use. But I didn't question it then. I was concerned about myself. I don't regard myself as an unusually brave man.

"Janet's in danger, too," Maynard added.

I didn't hesitate any longer. "Okay, Doc. Where are they hiding?"

## 6. THE INVULNERABLES

SHERIFF 'CLAY 'RANCY came into the lab. "I've been thinkin' over what you told me, Maynard—" He stopped as his eyes fell on me. "Oh, you're here, are you?"

"I've just enlisted Jack's aid in an important undertaking," said Maynard.

"Listen. I'm glad to have cooperation, but I'm in charge. If anything's going to be done, I want to know about it. I'll know if it's the right thing to do."

"We were going to tell you, Sheriff," said Maynard.

"Okay. Like I said, I've been thinking over what you told me and it sounds to me like Jack Fayburn and Ruby Cascade have caught a new-fangled disease. It's my duty to see that it don't spread into an epidemic. This place is under quarantine. I've sworn in the security guards as deputy sheriffs and I've ordered them not to let anybody leave until Dr. Grant and me decide that the danger of catching it is past."

"Sheriff," I said, "I think Janet Deslie should leave."

"Nobody leaves. It's either an epidemic or a murder case, probably both, and nobody is gonna go away from here till I get it wrapped up."

"Dr. Maynard just told me her life is in danger."

"A lot of lives may be in danger if she spreads what's the matter with Jack Fayburn and Miss Cascade."

"What about the coroner and undertaker and yourself, they've been exposed too?"

"Too late to do anything about the coroner and undertaker. I hope they didn't catch anything. As for me, I'm comin' up for reelection, and I've got to show the voters what kind of a man I am. I'm staying, too."

The sheriff found a straight-backed chair and slid it over between us. "We'll find Fayburn and the girl soon enough," he said. "They'll get hungry. They'll come to the cafeteria and



The sun bath was not relaxation.

either Adolph or me'll be sittin' there waitin'."

Maynard shifted on the stool while he put his glasses where they belonged again. "They'll get hungry," he said nodding. "But in this heat they'll probably get thirsty first. You see, Sheriff, there's only one place where they can possibly be. That's on the roof of this building. They're up there taking a sun bath."

The sheriff leaned forward in his chair. "Damn," he said. "Why didn't I think of that? They could've climbed up the fire escape last night without being seen. The roof is the only place we didn't look for them."

"There's water up there," I said to Maynard. "A whole water tank full."

"They'll contaminate the water supply!" the sheriff said. Suddenly he leaned back in his chair. "No, they won't. It would take a lot of doing to get water out of that tank, unless they shot a hole in it."

"I'm asking Bob to go up on the roof and talk to them," said Maynard.

"Better I should get a posse and go up and bring them down," said the sheriff.

"You'd only get some good men shot," Maynard said. "Remember, they've got two guns. And if we can believe what Jack told you, you can fill them full of lead without killing them. A single bullet could kill you or any of your men."

The sheriff stood up. He had



It was a rite of grim necessity.

refilled his holster with a .38-caliber Colt Trooper, a heavy-duty weapon with plenty of punching power. It was a gun Adolph had lent him.

"That's why I ain't gonna let Reeve go up there," he said decisively. "What if he'd get himself killed? All my constituents would say I let him get himself shot up doin' something I was scared to do. No, sir. They've got to eat and we'll starve them out. It may take two weeks, but if they've got a disease it may not be that long."

He glanced at the table and noted the shotgun. "And furthermore," he said, "if they're on top of this roof, we're gonna make sure they get no more guns. I'll have Adolph get the arms and

ammo out of the store room and I'll see that there ain't any more guns in this building. I'll start by takin' your shotgun, Maynard." He strode across the room and picked up the gun. He tucked the gun under his arm and strode out of the room.

I looked at Maynard. "I'm going up there anyhow," I said.

"Good boy!" he said. "I hoped you would." He rose and went to the window. I joined him. "The sun's about right," he said. "They'll be sun-bathing now."

I looked at him and wondered how he knew. It was something that he'd figured out and I was fed up with theories by now.

Down below there was no sign of activity. A jeep was patrolling the fence as usual. I saw signs

of activity around the XDW-49, which had been towed over to the main hangar for checking.

We moved away from the window.

"What do you want me to do?"

Doc sat down on the stool, where he'd been sitting before.

"We've got to find a weakness, Bob," he explained. "Everybody, everything has an Achilles' heel. My theories about the china egg may be cockeyed, but we've still got a man who's not at all normal to deal with. After you talk to him and to Ruby, we'll know a little more, I hope. Now my idea of his vulnerable spot is in the totally different life processes that are struggling for control of Jack's body—and Ruby's too. One can make that body survive bullets, but why should we discount ourselves. The human race has a lot to be proud of and we might easily have something in our natures that would look miraculous to the china egg. I don't know what to tell you to look for, Bob. But you must see them. Watch every move and every action that might be significant. Something that will give us a clue may show itself."

I nodded. It was a large order and a lot depended on me. "I'll do my best," I said.

"I know you will. One thing you might ask them." Maynard picked up the fragments of the china egg and examined them a moment. "I've got a hunch that they picked the roof as a hideout for a particular reason. You might ask them if they're not

afraid they'll get a bad case of sunburn. I'd like to know how they'll answer that."

"Okay," I said. "Come on." I started toward the lab door with Maynard at my heels. You've often heard about a sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach. Maybe you've had one, if you've ever done something that's hardly safe, as who hasn't? I had a sinking feeling. I had a hollow feeling. And it wasn't in my stomach. It was in the pit of my guts.

The corridor, which ran the full length of the upstairs, was empty. The ladder the sheriff had used the night before to explore the loft leaned against the wall at the end. In the ceiling, a few feet away from the ladder was an oblong trap door, about fourteen inches wide and maybe two feet long. This was the only entrance to the loft, which was unused.

Maynard and I moved the step ladder out from the wall and set it up under the trap door. It was ironic to think of Jack and Ruby right over the sheriff's head when he was conducting his night-long search for them. The sheriff had not considered the roof, possibly because he did not think of them climbing the fire escapes on the outside of the building. The fire escapes were simply iron ladders and they ended about ten feet from the ground. However, Jack with his superior strength and probably Ruby, too, could easily have leaped, grasped the bottom rung



and pulled themselves up to the ladder part. The sheriff might have examined the hatch cover in the loft, found it hooked on the inside and decided that it was useless to explore the roof.

I mounted the ladder. The board that blocked the trap door slid back easily.

"Good luck, Bob!" Maynard said softly.

"Thanks." I put my arms through the hole and swung myself up.

It was dark. I couldn't see any light except the rectangular patch that marked the trap door. Squatting on the edge of this opening I reached down and felt a catwalk of planks running toward the center of the building. Bending forward and walking in a stooping position, I moved along the catwalk, feeling each step with my foot. The fingers of my hands brushed through cowwebs and dust. The whole place smelled musty.

I took about twenty steps before my hands found the hatchway to the roof. I ran my hands around the edge of the cover, which was about three feet square, till I found hooks on either side. Both hooks fitted tightly. It took a lot of pushing to unfasten them.

At last I had them undone and I put my hands in the center of the covering and pushed up. The cover gave with a creaking sound that made me stand tense, listening for movement on the roof overhead. There was no sign that

it had been noticed. Maybe Jack and Ruby weren't even there.

I relaxed and dropped to my haunches on the catwalk while I figured what I'd do. If I flung the cover back suddenly and took Jack by surprise, he might mistake my motives. On the other hand, I didn't want him aiming a pistol at the opening and squeeze the trigger just as my head appeared.

The best move, I decided, would be to fling back the cover, stick my head out and yell. If Jack tried to use the gun, I could drop back below the roof level and run for my life, hoping to reach the trap door to the lower floor before he got to the hatchway and shot at me.

On the other hand, if he showed no signs of being bloodthirsty, I could crawl out on the roof and try to learn what I could.

I took a deep breath, stood up and braced my hands against the hatch cover. Then I shoved. The hatch cover flopped back. Sunlight streamed through the opening.

I stood erect, my eyes just clearing the top. I saw Jack and Ruby on the sunny side of the water tower, about twenty-five feet away.

At the sound of the hatch-cover falling to the roof, Jack scrambled up to his feet. His right hand clutched the Smith & Wesson that had belonged to Sheriff Rancy.

"Jack!" I yelled. "Don't shoot!

It's me—Bob Reeve. I'm not armed and I didn't come here to hurt you."

Jack did not raise the gun. His mouth turned upward in the mirthless grin I'd seen on his face the night before. He turned to Ruby, who had started to rise. "It's Bob. He's come to pay us a visit."

Jack wore only the pants of his pajamas and Ruby was still dressed in the scanty bathing suit she had worn the night before. Her beach robe was on the roof where she'd been lying.

She waved her hand to me. "Hello, Bob!"

I put my hands over the edge of the hatchway. "I'd like to talk to you, Jack," I said. "Am I welcome?"

"Of course." He put the gun down on the roof and held out his two hands, palms forward. "See? No gun."

With misgivings, I scrambled out onto the roof and stood up facing Jack. He remained where I'd first seen him and I walked toward him.

I looked up into the sky. The sun was halfway to-zenith and its heat was intense, even though it wasn't much past 9 o'clock.

"Aren't you afraid of getting a bad case of sunburn up here?" I asked.

Jack looked at me with those unblinking eyes. "You didn't come up here to ask me that, did you, Bob?"

"Well, it does seem like a funny place to be," I said, as if

there hadn't been a murder and a shot at Janet in the dark.

"The sun is invigorating," Ruby said. "It makes us full of—"

"Ruby!" Jack's voice rang out. He turned back and watched me warily. "Why did you come here, Bob?"

I took another step toward him. "There's no use beating around the bush, Jack. You know what's been going on. You know your reasons better than I do. But don't you think it would be better if you and Ruby came down from here and surrendered to the sheriff? If you shot Willy, I know you did it in self-defense. If Ruby shot him, she probably did it to protect you. In either case, I think you can escape serious trouble by giving yourself up."

"So that hick sheriff persuaded you to come up here!" Jack's voice was shrill. "Bob—anybody but you, I'd throw him off the roof."

I stopped. I didn't want to get any closer to him. His friendly manner was fast waning.

Suddenly Jack relaxed. "I'm sorry. For a minute I forgot we were friends."

"Jack," I said, "something's got into you. You're not the same any more."

Jack looked at me solemnly. "Yes, something has. I won't deny it. But it's something that will not harm you, Bob. Eventually you'll have it, too. So will everyone. It will be a new day for the world."

And now tears were rolling down Jack's cheeks.

"We'll be friends like we used to be, Bob," he went on. "And Janet will be my friend again, too."

"That slut!" Ruby spoke with venom in her voice. "I'll kill her!"

Jack turned to Ruby. "You mustn't say that! We need Janet. She's the only woman on the base beside you. If we are going to grow, she must be one of us."

"She won't have you!" Ruby said.

"Very well. She will have someone else."

I asked, "When is all this going to happen, Jack?"

"Very soon. And please tell the others to be patient. If they try to disturb us I'll have to kill them. I can kill, Bob. So can Ruby. And we will kill if you try to disturb us."

"And you can't kill us," said Ruby.

"That's right," Jack said. "I should have died in the plane yesterday. But I got well. There wasn't even a broken place in my skin by the time I reached this building. And Willy Plotz shot me through the heart!"

"Jack," I said, "you tore up my trailer. You destroyed my camera and films!"

"I was looking for the movie films. Where are they?"

"I sent them to Kansas City. Why do you want them?"

Jack shrugged. "I don't know. I don't suppose it makes any difference really. But after Dr.

Grant examined me, I knew I was different. I was afraid that you'd find out why on the films and I—er—I felt insecure. Sorry I busted up everything, but it won't matter after today."

There was a long silence before I said, "What are you, Jack? You're not human any more."

A puzzled look came over his face. His eyes remained unblinking, but the lids narrowed perceptibly, and his mouth turned down in a frown. "I really don't know. I don't seem to know what I'm going to do next."

A slight movement to my left caused me to turn. Above the wooden parapet on the east side of the building was a head, wearing a security cop's cap. It was Whitaker. He brought up an arm, pulling himself up astride the parapet. Then he pulled a pistol from its holster at his side.

"Throw up your hands, Fayburn, you're under arrest!"

Jack turned, saw Whitaker, and pounced on the pistol he had put on the roof-top after he first saw me. At the same instant a gun cracked, but it was not Whitaker's weapon. The bullet came from the opposite direction.

Turning, I saw Sheriff Rancy on the west side of the roof. He had climbed the other fire escape.

Jack's body jerked with the impact of the bullet. I saw blood trickling down his left side, just below the armpit. Then, as I watched, the trickle stopped. The

wound seemed to close in front of my eyes.

Whitaker's gun blasted and the sheriff fired again.

Jack fell backward as both bullets hit him. His pistol slid out of his hand.

Ruby screamed. She dropped to her knees and picked up Willy Plotz's .32-caliber pop gun, which lay in the folds of her beach robe. It cracked. The bullet hit Whitaker. He teetered, dropped his pistol, and it fell to the roof. He clutched the wall with both hands. But he was losing consciousness. He swayed and fell over the side of the roof. I felt sick at my stomach.

Ruby turned and fired at Sheriff Rancy. She missed this time and before she could fire again, the sheriff's gun cracked. Ruby stumbled back, but the water tower scaffolding kept her from falling. Up came the gun and Sheriff Rancy turned a trifle green when he saw that bullets had no effect. He disappeared behind the parapet, just as Ruby fired a second time.

Now she turned on me, her unblinking eyes blazing fury. "You brought them here, Bob Reeve. You tried to trick us! But bullets don't work on us!"

Jack was getting on his feet. The bleeding had stopped and the torn flesh was already growing over his wounds. I watched incredulously. Jack caught my stare.

"Regeneration," he said. "A function that lower animals have, but man fails to retain.

When you're like Ruby and me, you'll know what it is to be immortal!"

"He tried to trick us, Jack," Ruby said. "He'll try again!"

She raised the gun but Jack held up his hand and then reached for his Smith & Wesson. He straightened. "Is that true, Bob?"

"No. I came here to talk to you. I wouldn't lie."

"I know you wouldn't. What do you want to talk about? What is there to say?"

"We think you're ill, Jack. What's happened to you?"

Jack did not answer for a second. "I told you. I don't know."

"He's dangerous," said Ruby, still aiming the gun at me.

Jack held the revolver at his side. The wound in his side had healed and I told myself it was just a dream. It couldn't happen. But I'm old enough to know a dream from reality.

"Would you hurt your old friend?" Jack asked quietly.

"You're not Jack any more," I said.

The hand moved, but he still did not aim the gun at me.

"I should kill you, Bob, but—"

"Let me!" Ruby's voice was almost a scream. She squeezed the trigger on that old model gun.

The hammer fell on an empty chamber. That last shot had been the final live cartridge in the cylinder.

I turned and jumped through the hatchway. My left foot miss-

ed the planking and I heard the crack of laths and plastering as my shoe sank through.

I freed my foot and found the planking and then my eyes fell on a patch of light on the floor beneath the hatchway. Silhouetted in the center of it was Jack Fayburn's shadow and the gun was coming up to aim at me.

I crawled back into the darkness. The gun cracked, sounding very loud as it echoed in the loft. The bullet missed.

A hollow laugh came from the roof. "I'll see you later, Bob! The next time you won't be so lucky."

I heard the covering drop into place, darkening the loft.

I scrambled down the catwalk to the rectangular patch of light marking the trap door. Maynard, white-faced, looked up from the corridor below. He put his hand on the ladder to steady it.

"Thank God, you're all right! I heard shooting."

I reached the floor. "Whitaker's badly hurt—maybe killed." My legs felt rubbery and I was dripping perspiration. "Sheriff Rancy butted in. Spoiled everything."

Footsteps came up the stairs. Turning, I saw Sheriff Rancy's figure come into view. "Broke my orders, huh?" he snarled.

I said, "If you hadn't tried to play cops and robbers, nobody would have been hurt. How's Whitaker?"

"Dr. Grant's working on him. I don't think he's got a chance." The sheriff's anger still flared.

"But I told you not to go up there."

Maynard said, "I'll take the responsibility for urging Bob to go, in spite of your so-called orders. You take the blame for what happened to Whitaker."

This calmed the sheriff down a little. "I reckon my end wasn't smart," he admitted. "Those folks ain't human. Bullets don't stop 'em any more than a second or two. Whitaker hit Fayburn, too, and all any bullet did was to floor him." He stared at the wall. "Maynard, I'm gonna make you a deputy sheriff."

Maynard lifted his eyebrows and his glasses slid down on his nose. "How come?"

"Hell," said Sheriff Rancy, "this thing has got 'way beyond the things that come under the duties of a country sheriff. I've got to have a scientist on my staff."

"What do you think I've been doing, if I haven't been trying to bring this thing under control," he said. He opened a drawer of his lab bench, brought out a bottle of whiskey and poured me a shot in a glass beaker. I gulped it down, without a chaser.

"You did learn something Bob?" he asked.

"Everything you said was true."

"What about the sunlight? Did you ask him about getting sunburned?"

The whiskey began to take hold and I felt a little better. I started at the beginning and told him

everything. Maynard listened and nodded. "I think my theory's beginning to hold water."

A knock sounded at the door. The sheriff opened it a crack, saw who it was and then opened it wide. It was Adolph.

"Well, Whitaker's dead," said Adolph. "He was shot through the throat and the fall broke his neck."

Sheriff Rancy followed Adolph out of the room.

Maynard poured me another shot of whiskey. . . .

## 7. OF SOUL-STUFF AND ENERGY

**P**RESENTLY I was in full control of myself again. "I wish I knew what we were up against," I said.

"The more we generalize, the less accurate we are."

"Doc," I said, "we both want to lick this thing. The only way we can do it is to figure out what it is and where it's vulnerable."

"They are still worried about something. They're insecure. I don't know exactly why yet, but we'll learn. We'd better, because once the battle line goes beyond the airbase the whole human race will be in peril. We must bring them to a showdown."

"Supposing they don't want a showdown?"

"You've had closer contact with Jack than anyone else. Maybe you have seen something that will help us."

"There are times when Jack acts like the old friend I knew. Then he's different."

Maynard pondered for a moment. "Let's say life is energy. A living man has energy. You know what energy is?"

"Energy is the capacity to do work. It may take many forms, mechanical, electrical, thermal, electromagnetism, atomic power, and so on."

"And I think life can be included. Electromagnetism, in its various forms, seems to be the primary kind. This body of mine—" he patted his chest—"seems in some way to be tied up with the fundamental force of the universe. And it might well be related to the thing that makes an electric motor run."

"An electric motor isn't alive."

"How do you know? How do you know that you're alive and that an electric motor or an electronic machine isn't?"

"Because they're not made of living tissue."

"It's something inside that makes a thing dead or alive. Maybe the energy that flows through wires is what makes the difference. Couldn't that energy, properly nourished and supplied, make a piece of metal alive?"

I didn't know. I couldn't be expected to know how a piece of metal felt.

Dr. Maynard lifted the whiskey bottle, which still sat on the table. He noticed the level was low, and apparently decided to save the remainder. He put the bottle back in the drawer. "Since we started tampering with the atom," he said, "we've learned a great deal about certain kinds of energy. One form or another, they all go back to primary force. If life can be defined as energy, then it may be the same basic force as light, electricity, heat, and so on. In fact, we have other evidence indicating electrical action in our body."

He paused. "Energy as we know it, may be the stuff the immortal soul is made of," he said quietly.

"Doc," I said, "please don't get started on religion."

He smiled. "When I was very young and thought I knew everything, I saw no room for God in the universe. Things seemed so snug and so complete in natural law, that I thought it was everything."

"But I went beyond that phase. I said I didn't know. But I discovered that I said *I do not know* with a hope."

"Then man began to unlock the secrets of energy. We learned it was indestructible. That matter is created from it. Its total in the universe is never changed. Energy is the most eternal and infinite thing there is. If life is energy, the human soul is immortal."

He took a deep breath, but I did not interrupt.

"I believe in an infinite universe, which includes a Supreme Being, and I want to point out that the china egg is also a part of the universe. It is as holy or as unholy as we are. Life is really neither good, nor evil, angelic or sinful. Life is what it must be in order to survive. The first law of life is survival of the species, and the second is survival of the individual."

"So it's our business to protect ourselves and future generations? Is that what you mean?"

"Yes," said Maynard. "The china egg brought a new form of life here. I don't know all the facts, but I can say that much. It obeys the first two laws of life, and it will attempt to survive. The only way it can survive is by destroying us."

"Jack and Ruby are the Adam and Eve of a new kind of life," I mused.

"But not life as we know it. I'm sure of that much. It has borrowed human bodies to exist, but there were two of them. One male, one

female. That indicates that a sexual reproduction is necessary."

"Why should it destroy us, if we're necessary to it?" I asked.

"It wants our bodies. I believe it is a disembodied energy capable of moving in and functioning on this plane through us."

"If there's much disembodied life energy floating around, we'll all be—uh—occupied," I said.

"Possessed, is the word. Abnormal psychology contains many authenticated cases of this sort. As for more of it 'floating around', I suppose it is always present. But something happened yesterday that permitted it to operate as it now operates. As a result we have indestructible foes."

"Got any ideas what we can do?"

"I have an idea, but first I want to talk to Pat Callinan. You run along and tell Darling as much as his little brain can hold. Tell him I'm working on the problem."

"How much time do we have, Doc?"

He studied the floor a minute. "Very little," he said. "Jack and Ruby are absorbing energy from sunlight—the food for the new life they store. The sun is very radiant in Kansas."

I slid from my stool. Doc followed me to the door and locked it as I went down the stairs.

Janet waved to me from Ruby's old desk, just outside Darling's private cubicle as I entered the office. She said, "Mr. Darling said he wanted to see you, Bob. I was trying to get you on the phone."

"Thanks, sweetie," I said. "How about lunch together?"

She glanced at the clock on the wall, angry voices rose outside the door, and Roger Mall entered, followed by a security cop and Sheriff

Rancy. Mall was angry. "You'll hear more about this, Sheriff," Mall said. "And as for you, Belgard, you're through."

"Not after Darling hears what you tried to do," Sheriff Rancy said. "More than likely, Belgard will get a promotion."

The sheriff walked toward the door to Darling's cubby, rapped on the glass. The door opened and Darling came out.

The sheriff gestured toward Mall. "Your flunky was trying to slip away," he said. "The guard at the gate called me and I told him to bring him in."

Mall stepped forward. "C. F. This man is acting like he owns the plant."

"I put this place under quarantine," Rancy said. "That means nobody comes or goes till we know how contagious a disease we got here."

"We're like rats in a trap," said Mall. "We ought to be running for our lives. And the sheriff is keeping us here."

Darling frowned. "Are you sure it's a disease we're up against, Sheriff?"

"I talked to Doc Maynard about it. He sort of gave me the idea it was something like that."

"Did you talk to Dr. Grant?"

"Dr. Grant said he just didn't know."

"Dr. Grant would know more about diseases than Maynard."

"Two killings are enough reason to keep you all here, anyhow." The sheriff chewed violently on his gum.

Darling groped for words. "I think you'd better forget about leaving, Roger," he said. "What business did you have in town?"

"No business," Roger said. "I'm plain scared. Jack and Ruby aren't

human. I want to be where it's safe."

"Keep your voice down," Sheriff Rancy said. "First thing we know we'll have a panic on our hands and some nice people will get bullet holes in their hides."

"You have the authority, Sheriff," Darling said. "I don't suppose there's much we can do about it. But I don't really believe it's a disease myself."

The sheriff said, "I think it's a disease."

Darling's eyes fell on me. "You were up on the roof, Bob," he said. "What do you think?"

I said, "Dr. Maynard told me there was a good chance of this thing spreading."

"He told me it was something like a virus. An electrical virus," said Sheriff Rancy.

"Why hasn't someone else shown the symptoms?" asked Roger.

"Maybe it hasn't showed up in the rest of us yet," said the sheriff. "I promise you that if nothing shows up in a day or two—by the inquest tomorrow even—you can all go."

Darling was impressed. He liked men like Rancy, and I think he secretly disliked Roger Mall, but Roger was the type of man Darling had to have by his side. "I'll see your orders are obeyed, Sheriff," he said.

"Thanks," said Rancy. He gave Mall a distrustful look, turned and walked out of the room.

"Come into my office, Roger," said Darling. He turned to me. "You, too, Bob. Let's talk over this thing."

We went in and I gave him an account, as near as I could, of what I'd learned on the roof and what Maynard had told me. Darling didn't look convinced. He still be-



lieved that Jack and Ruby were under the influence of something else and not a disease either. Doc knew his own ideas and could explain them better. I wished he were here.

"Everyone knows that beings from outer space are smarter than we are," said Darling. I suppose he read that in a newspaper from outer space, or a comic strip from this side of outer space. I don't know where else he'd get the idea.

"You're right, C. F.," said Roger. "We're licked. We can't shoot them and they can shoot us. The only thing in our favor is the fact that they haven't got much ammunition."

Darling nodded.

"Maynard thinks he can work out something," I said.

"What can he do?" Darling said, impatiently.

"Doc's idea is to make their energy go to work—transform it into something else, less harmful."

"It's impossible,"

"You're right, C. F.," said Mall. "I think we ought to come to terms. Make a deal to save our skins."

"You mean that since we can't lick them, we ought to join them?" Darling asked. "Mmm. Maybe you're right."

"Sure," Roger said sagely. "Joining forces with a competitor is a sound business principle and there aren't any anti-trust laws to stop us in this case."

"Yes, very sound," said Darling, half-convinced. "But can we?"

"A fellow named Chamberlain had the same idea once," I said. "The result was a lot of bloodshed."

"The two situations aren't the same."

Roger said, "I think we ought to sound out Jack and Ruby. Maybe they'd listen."

"I tried it," I said. "It didn't work."

Mall said, "I wish you'd have let us in on your plans instead of bargaining in there willy-nilly like you did. We might have handled it better."

"You tried to run," I said. "Would you have crawled up there on the roof to face them?"

Roger reddened. "This is no disease!" he insisted.

"Okay," I said, "but it's an enemy of the human race. And a germ is rather tame in comparison."

"How can you be sure we can't make them an acceptable offer?" Darling asked.

"Dammit, C. F.," I said, "if you had a royal flush and a cinch on all the players in a poker game, would you listen if they told you not to bet?"

Darling shook his head. "This is no poker game. Jack was my friend. So was Ruby. Surely they'll listen to me if they realize that I bear no malice."

"It wouldn't work, C. F.," I said. "Why not?"

"They've got us over a barrel and they want us—need us to live."

Darling looked at me like he'd looked at Sheriff Rancy. "I admire your spirit, Bob. But you're not practical."

Strangely enough, as I look back on the grim days at the Pennington base, I can see that all of us, even Dr. Maynard were a little wrong and a little right. Even Roger Mall's ideas weren't too far away from the happy median.

"Okay," I said, "but if you want to talk peace with Jack, do it yourself. Or let Roger Mall talk to them, if he's got guts enough. But I know he wouldn't because he tried to run—tried to save his own hide at the expense of the rest of us."

"Bob!" said Roger, getting up out of his chair.

I stood up, too, and faced him.

"Steady!" said Darling.

"I'll accept your apology, Bob," said Roger.

I didn't know what there was to apologize for. I said: "Aw, go jump in a filing cabinet."

Mall got redder than ever.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" said Darling hastily. "Let's keep our tempers."

Mall turned to Darling. "C. F., I don't have to take this kind of talk from a loco photographer!"

Maybe I shouldn't have done it, but I gave Roger Mall a push with my hands right in the middle of his big, fat belly. He sat down in the waste basket beyond Darling's desk. I turned and walked out of the room.

"He attacked me!" Roger cried as I left.

"Get out of that ridiculous position, Roger," said Darling. "We have some thinking to do."

I felt better. Maybe I'd convinced Darling that we oughtn't to make peace with the china egg. Anyhow, I'd tried. I stopped at Janet's desk.

"It's lunch time. Come on, sweetie. Let's eat."

## 8. THE RAY GUN

WE MET Sheriff Rancy coming out of the cafeteria. He said Whitaker's inquest would be held tomorrow, same time as the inquiry on the death of Willy Plotz.

"Where's Doc?" I asked.

Rancy jerked his thumb toward the stairs. "He and young Callinan are working on something," he said. "Dr. Grant and that quiet fellow named Higgins are helping. Grant

and Higgins just went to the Hangar for more supplies."

Most of the mechanical supplies were kept in the Hangar. "What are they making?"

The sheriff shrugged. "Dunno. Looks like they're building a radio. They're hauling in vacuum tubes and stuff."

Janet and I found a table by ourselves in the cafeteria and presently Pat Callinan and Dr. Maynard came in and joined us.

"Sheriff says you're building a radio," I said.

"An X-ray tube on the do-it-yourself plan," Pat Callinan answered.

"That's sort of a large order, isn't it?"

"It has been done, but I wouldn't advise an amateur to try it," Doc said.

"Figure it'll help our cause?"

"If X-rays don't, nothing will," Maynard said. "Especially since we have a time limit, which I think will be sunset at the latest."

Pat said, "We're sealing radio tube filaments in flasks. Our main trouble is going to be getting a good vacuum. Radio tubes aren't high enough in vacuum."

Janet looked bewildered. "The same kind of X-rays that doctors use?"

"They're made with electrons beamed on a metal surface," Doc said. "You know what an electron is, I suppose?"

Janet shook her head. "I don't."

"An electron is an atomic particle, one of the basic things in an atom," Maynard said. "They always have a negative charge, except when they're positrons—"

"In which case the resemblance to an electron is purely coincidental," said Pat.

"In a high vacuum a metal fila-

ment gives off a stream of electrons," Maynard went on. "This is the basic principle of all vacuum tubes. But in order to produce X-rays, there must be high voltage, high vacuum and a metal target. The higher the voltage, the harder the X-rays—which means they have greater penetrating power."

"Whew!" I said.

"X-rays are similar to visible light, and are a part of the entire system of electromagnetic radiation. This starts with radio waves which have been measured up to 25 miles in length, and are followed, with decreasing length through infra-red, which is distinguishable by heat, visible light, ultra-violet, X-rays, gamma rays and cosmic rays."

"Is that all there are?" I asked.

"All that we know of," said Maynard. "My personal opinion is that the scale extends in both directions." He turned back to Janet. "X-rays penetrate all solids, but go through some things better than others. A metal or bone object, for example, stops enough of them to leave a shadow on a photographic plate. That's how X-ray photographs are made. Is that clear?"

"No," said Janet. "But I asked for it."

"X-rays are dangerous," Pat added. "But we're dealing with some tough characters and that's the way we want our X-rays."

"What about Jack?" she asked quietly. "Will it harm him?"

Maynard looked at me for help. "Not more than he's harmed already," he said.

We all rose from the table and I went upstairs with them to the laboratory. The X-ray tube, bearing no resemblance to modern equipment, was almost finished. It was made of glass laboratory equip-

ment and supported by metal standards. Radio tube equipment had been sealed inside and there was an opening connecting with a motor-driven pump.

"We're just about ready to test it," Pat said.

"How will you know?" I asked. Although I'd developed films for a clinic, I'd never gone into X-rays very thoroughly.

"By the way it acts," said Maynard.

Pat got to work with a soldering iron on the wires. Maynard walked across the room to a small bookcase and pulled out a book. It was a collection of Ambrose Bierce's short stories. He thumbed through the pages and stopped. Then he handed the book to me.

"Read that," he said, pointing out a paragraph. It was from *Moxon's Monster*:

*"There is no such thing as dead, inert matter; it is all alive; all instinct with force, actual and potential; all sensitive to the same forces in its environment, and susceptible to the contagion of higher and subtler ones residing in such superior organisms as it may be brought into relation with, as those of man when he is fashioning it into an instrument of his will."*

"Bierce wrote that before the turn of the century," Maynard said. "Long before scientific thought had begun to speculate that matter was made of energy and that energy might be the key to life."

"It's animism," I said. "It's like the savage who sees spirits in rivers and mountains and seas."

"What's wrong with belief in that?" Maynard asked. "It's a primitive belief, but it is right for

primitive people. As we grow, we see deeper."

"I wonder," I said, "whether we're susceptible to the contagion of the egg, or it's susceptible to ours."

"It will depend on which is the higher form of life," said Maynard. "The definition of higher life, is one that is capable of adapting itself the best to all circumstances."

"An accident might decide the whole business," I said.

"Yes," said Maynard. "Sometimes a witch doctor can cure a sick man."

I didn't figure out what he said till later. He was busy and presently I left.

I stopped by the office downstairs. Janet was not at her desk. I asked Mall about her.

"She wasn't feeling well," he said. "She's gone over to her trailer to rest."

I thought of Jack Fayburn on the roof. Janet shouldn't have left the building. Jack had plans for Janet.

I left the office and hurried to the back door of the Barracks. I stepped out into the hot sun from the air-conditioned building.

Janet's trailer was less than 50 feet from the door and I started toward it.

"Bob!"

I looked up. Jack stood behind the parapet on the roof looking down at me. He held a revolver in his right hand with the muzzle pointing to the ground near where I stood. "Where are you going?"

I looked straight at him. "None of your damn business, Jack."

"Better go back into the building."

"What difference is it to you?"

"There has been too much moving around. And I'm not underesti-

mating Dr. Maynard. Foolishly, I let him leave the building today and I know that he's up to something. Not that I think he can do anything that will interrupt my plans, but he might make them harder to accomplish. This building is under siege."

"From the roof, I suppose?"

"Exactly. Anyone entering or leaving becomes a target. Now, if you don't mind, go back and tell C. F. to phone the mechanics in the Hangar and the security cops at the gates to stay put, unless they want to stop a few slugs. Now, run along, Bob," he said, patronizingly.

I glanced at Janet's trailer, less than 50 feet away.

"I'll count to three, then shoot," he said.

The door of the trailer opened. Janet was coming out.

"One . . ."

"Go back, Janet!" I yelled.

She started toward me.

"Two . . ."

"Jack!" she screamed. "Don't!"

He had said that anyone would be shot—

I watched her running toward me.

"Three!"

I closed my eyes and waited. There was no shot. Instead I felt Janet's arms around me.

"Don't you dare shoot!" said Janet.

Jack Fayburn laughed. "It's not like you, Bob, to hide behind a woman's skirts."

I opened my eyes. Jack had lowered the gun.

Still keeping her arms around my shoulders, she turned me around and pushed me gently toward the doorway to the Barracks. She followed, her head thrown back, watching Jack.

His hollow laughter echoed as I stepped inside.

Darling stood inside the door, mopping his brow. "Good God!" he said.

Janet closed the door and threw her arms around me. It was not a protective gesture this time.

## 9. THE QUIET HERO

THE siege of the Pennington Barracks became a fact when two security cops came walking leisurely in from the jeep which delivered them to a spot opposite the Barracks on the blacktop drive.

No one saw them approaching in time to warn them. Jack waited till they were in easy range, then fired, dropping one of them, the cop named Belgard, with a bullet in his shoulder. The other man dragged Belgard back behind Roger Mall's trailer.

"Next time I'll shoot to kill," Jack called down from the rooftop.

Darling got on the phone, and warned the other officers and the mechanics. It was during this call that he learned Dr. Grant and Higgins had driven over to the Hangar in the jeep for more electronics equipment just a few minutes before.

The fact that Dr. Grant was where he could treat Belgard's wound was fortunate. But we realized that if anything happened to those of us remaining in the Barracks there would be no physician to treat us.

I took stock of our situation. Fourteen men, including Belgard, who was wounded, were outside the Barracks.

Inside the Barracks were Darling, Roger Mall, Felix Maynard, Colonel Van Haber, Pat Callinan, Sheriff Rancy, Adolph and four of

his security police, Janet Deslie, the cook and his two helpers. A total of sixteen.

I was in Darling's office as he finished making his calls. He turned to me. "How about your films, Bob? How will we get them here?"

"No use trying, C. F.," I said. "Phone Kansas City and tell them to call it off."

"Kansas City called after lunch and said the films were being flown here. The plane ought to be showing up in 30 minutes."

"It's got a radio, hasn't it?"

"Yes, but we don't have a transmitter. The only one is in the control tower."

"Call Kansas City and have them radio the operator to deposit the films on the runway and take off. Maybe we can get them after dark. In any case, Jack won't shoot the pilot."

Darling jiggled the cradle, then replaced the phone. "Dead," he said in desperation.

"How come? You just used it."

Darling got up and walked to the northeast window of his office. We looked out on the phone wires stretching from the Barracks to his trailer. A transformer had been set up on a short pole in front of the trailer. The box had been opened and we could see, even at a distance, that the insides had been torn out.

"Jack did it," I said. "He climbed down the fire escape and waited till you finished your calls to the Hangar."

Darling nodded. "Yes, he probably listened on the extension in my trailer."

As we stood there watching, Dr. Grant and a security cop loaded the wounded man, Belgard, into a jeep and drove back toward the Hangar. "Tell them to get out of here," I



Higgins died a hero—that others might live.

said. "No use for them to get the same thing we're going to get."

Darling sighed. "I wish I'd listened to Roger," he said. "But after the sheriff made it clear no one was to leave, I issued strict orders. They've got no idea how things stand. I should have notified the governor," Darling said. "He'd send highway patrolmen, militia, or notified Washington."

"Anybody can second guess," I said.

Still watching out of the window, I saw a jeep leaving the Hangar. A single man was in it. I moved to the north window, but the jeep got out of sight. With Darling at my heels, we walked across the corridor into the cafeteria just in time to see the jeep coming around the garage, heading for the Control Tower.

"Higgins!" I exclaimed, recognizing the driver.

"I hope he's not going to try to come here!" Darling muttered.

The jeep halted. Higgins sprang out and started up the steel stairway to the control tower. I heard Jack's shout from the roof, but no shots were fired. The range was too far and Jack, no doubt, was saving his bullets.

Higgins made the tower.

I sensed what he intended to do and I raced back to the kitchen, switched on Herman's radio, dialed the Control Tower's frequency.

Herman went to the kitchen window and looked out. "The plane's coming," he said. "It's a Piper Cub."

"Darling airbase calling Piper!" came Higgins' voice over the radio.

It's funny about Higgins. He was a mild-mannered little man around the office who minded his own business. He had few close friends, because he lacked that certain some-

thing that makes a person good company.

Yet he was the only person who thought of making a dash to the tower and actually sending a warning to the pilot before he landed.

"Hello, base," came the pilot's voice. "All clear?"

Higgins said, "No planes on the field, but you'll have to be careful when you come in. We've got serious trouble here."

"Trouble?"

"Its nature is such that we can't release the information."

"Okay," said the pilot. "Everything's that way nowadays. What'll I do?"

"Make your landing and taxi up to about 100 feet in front of the tower. Don't go to the Barracks."

"What about this film? I was told to deliver it here."

"Put the package on the runway," said Higgins. "Then get out of here—fast."

"Okay, buddy, I make a living following orders."

I went to the kitchen window and saw the small cabin plane come in like a feather and taxi to a stop. The pilot climbed out, lugging three cans of film. He put them on the concrete airstrip, waved to the tower and climbed back.

He gunned the motor and was gone.

I heard Jack Fayburn and Ruby yelling from the rooftop and a moment later I saw Higgins in the jeep, starting out from the Control Tower. He reached the film, put it in the seat beside him, swung in a wide turn, and headed straight for the kitchen door.

A pistol cracked from the rooftop. Higgins crumpled over the steering wheel, but he hung on. The car veered and crashed.

I plunged out of the door and pulled Higgins out of the jeep.

"Get him inside—I'll take the films!" It was Darling at my side.

I carried him through the door. Jack apparently was standing on the roof directly above me. I could hear him swearing. I expected to feel a bullet tearing through me, but I heard something else. The flat click of a gun hammer, falling on an empty chamber.

Fayburn had emptied the second gun. The bullet that killed Higgins had been the last one in the cylinder. Twice I'd lived because Jack or Ruby lacked the bullet that had my number on it.

I laid Higgins on the floor. Darling already was inside and he'd put the films on a table. Now he dropped to his knees beside Higgins.

The bullet had gone through the top of Higgins' head. But even while he was dead, he kept the car going straight for the back door of the Barracks.

"I guess he's a bigger man than any of us thought," I said.

Darling looked toward the three cans of film, the pictures of the XDW-49's flight, for which Higgins had died to get them into our hands.

"Those pictures better be good," said C. F.

We carried Higgins' body upstairs and placed it in Dr. Grant's dispensary.

I took a projector from the storeroom and found a screen in one of the broom closets. I set up the projector and screen in Darling's office and Darling asked Van Haber, Mall and Dr. Maynard to join us.

The No. 2 camera showed Jack at the controls, so I threaded that reel first.

The camera had been behind Jack's right shoulder, but it showed enough of his face to catch his expression most of the time. It was a little distorted because of the transparent plastic of the helmet, but we got a general idea of what Jack was thinking. Unfortunately, there was no sound track.

We went through the blast-off, the vertical flight to 20,000 feet, and we saw Jack's body press against the seat under punishing acceleration. His face was distorted. From time to time his lips moved. He was groaning and swearing, but I knew that this was still the real Jack. Then I saw him smile a trifle. His lips moved again and I figured he was talking to Darling.

Now the big moment was at hand. Jack turned and looked almost straight into the camera. For a second I didn't realize that it wasn't the camera he had his eyes on, but something outside the plane.

His eyes seemed to widen as he caught sight of something. He couldn't believe what he saw. His mouth fell open and a look of utter consternation came upon his face.

His lips moved. I didn't have to be a lip reader to understand his

*"What the hell!"*

Now we could see it. A tiny white object was sailing across the interior of the plane. Not fast, just drifting. It hovered over Jack's shoulder.

Jack turned again. His lips moved. A second white object appeared.

*The second china egg.*

Both of them poised above his shoulder. Then one of the eggs swooped down. A flash of blackness obscured everything. The entire film was night, blacker than the ace of spades.



"Over-exposure!" groaned Darling.

"Over-exposure, my eye!" I said. "That's under-exposure, C. F. Over-exposure would make the film white!"

The blackness seemed to roll back like a mist. We saw Jack slumped forward in his harness and there was a hole in the shoulder of his G-suit. Around that hole was blood, just as we'd seen it after he landed.

The other egg was nowhere to be seen.

Jack stirred. He lifted his head slowly. His eyes opened, but they did not blink. He raised his gloved hand. He held, tightly clenched, the other china egg. Quickly he stuffed it into one of the large pockets on his trouser leg.

I shut off the projector.

"Show the next reel," said Maynard.

The third camera on the XDW-49 had been aimed toward the rear of the ship so that it showed the operation of the rockets as well as the earth behind the plane. As the reel started we watched the vertical flight upward, the leveling off and the circling of the plane into a path that had about a hundred-mile radius.

At twenty-thousand feet the curvature of the earth was faintly visible. It grew pronounced at 30,000 and beyond that point no one could have looked at the screen and doubted that we lived on a globe. The plane climbed to ten, twenty, thirty and forty miles. The surface lost its topographical features and even the Rocky Mountains to the west seemed like furrows in a field. A tiny speck of brightness marked the artificial lake at Kanopolis, and in the eastern part of the state the Kaw River was a mere white thread, winding eastward.

The plane's vapor trails streamed behind in a gently curving arc. Up to this point, I was watching with only mild interest, realizing that the important thing was to come. Suddenly the screen became alive and we saw an event that mankind had never before witnessed; something beyond human experience.

Above the rocket exhaust of the plane there stood a shadow, hardly discernible at first. Then it seemed to draw darkness out of the thin atmosphere around it until it became a deep shade of black. Finally, it was opaque.

Once I had made an enlargement of a Mt. Wilson observatory photograph of a section of the Milky Way in the constellation Ophiuchus. In the picture was a perfect letter S, the surname initial of the astronomer for whom I made the photo print. This, he told me, was "black nebula," so huge and thinly spread that our sun could pass through it without a perceptible dimming of sunlight reaching the earth. Yet, the size of this S-shaped cloud, at such a distance, had been such that it seemed opaque to the light of thousands of stars behind it. Some of those stars were larger and brighter than our sun.

The cloud hovering over the rocket jets was similar to these black nebulae of space. The opaque shadow twisted and swirled. It seemed alive. Tongues, like black flame, writhed and licked at the vapor trails around it.

"Black photons," said Maynard in a hoarse voice.

Suddenly part of the blackness broke away. It seemed to be going off by itself. Another segment parted and followed the first. Then both moved forward, straight toward the lens of my camera, not fast, but



The film revealed Fayburn's astonishment

rather as if drawn by some irresistible force.

Suddenly the rocket flare diminished. The horizon dipped downward as the plane went into a dive.

The shadows vanished out of camera range.

I turned on the lights and shut off the projector.

"A bad job of photography, if I ever saw one," said Roger Mall. "A good man wouldn't have had so much black in the pictures." Roger hadn't forgotten who shoved him into a waste basket.

Darling threw an irritated glance at Mall, then turned to Dr. Maynard. "What is it, Doc?"

Maynard rose and spoke to all of us. "It isn't a question a man can answer ad lib. I might be wrong. I must think; apply tests. Perhaps I can tell you soon—in a few hours maybe."

"Can't you give us a rough idea

what you think these china eggs are?"

He turned and left the room without answering.

After the others left, I put the cans of films on Higgins' desk. Poor Higgins had lost his life in delivering them. The films seemed to belong there.

## 10. THE CHAMBERLAIN TOUCH

"I'M AFRAID this thing won't be very effective," Pat Callinan told Maynard as he and I entered the lab after the session in Darling's office. "I've got a pump connected but the vacuum is really a problem with the equipment we have."

Maynard examined the apparatus. A large glass vessel had been used for the purpose. Wiring for



at sight of the egg.

the filament had been brought through one end and sealed by heat. At the base of the boat-shaped glass container, the anode wiring had been sealed. A third opening, which was unsealed, was in the base connected with rubber tubing which had been made airtight with a coating of chemicals. The rubber tubing led to a pump.

The metal target, against which the electrons from the cathode would be discharged, was a flat surface arranged so that the X-rays would be deflected in a straight line at a target.

"It ought to produce soft radiation at least," said Maynard. "These will still have dangerous penetrating power."

The X-ray equipment built by Dr. Maynard and Pat Callinan was the deadly, pioneer type. It was, in principle, much like the tube used by Sir William Crookes, one of the

first experimenters with X-rays.

"Okay, Pat," said Maynard. "Let's see how it works."

Gingerly Pat adjusted the rods and clamps so the tube would be focussed in the general direction of the roof. Pat then moved a switch and turned on the current. Then he turned a second switch and the pump began pulling air molecules from the tube.

The soft hum came from the generators and transformers as the voltage piled up. The tube lit. Presently it took on a pinkish glow.

A few moments passed and then I saw a dark space around the cathode. This is a common sight in X-ray tubes, but something about this black space seemed to send a shiver up my spine. A bluish beam extended from the cathode to the metal target. This was the cathode ray.

Soft X-rays start to appear

with the application of a few hundred volts, if the vacuum of the tube is sufficiently high. Voltages up to fifty million have been applied in production of X-rays. Such beams pierce steel quite easily. Ordinary X-ray machines have a much lower voltage and the radiation can be stopped by leaded glass.

As the pump continued to exhaust the gas in the tube, the bluish beam strengthened and the walls of the tube began to shine with a sickly green color.

"How about it, Doc?" Pat asked.

Maynard nodded and turned off the current. The glow in the tube died. Pat shut off the pump. "Works better than I expected," he said. "Now we've got to figure out where to aim it."

"Can't you sort of move it around, spray the whole roof like a machine-gun?" I asked.

Maynard smiled grimly and shook his head. "X-rays don't work that way," he said. "You've got to train them on the target and keep them there to get results. I suppose we'll have to guess where they are."

"Why guess?" I asked. "Let me climb up the target and act as a spotter."

"Sure," said Pat. "Roger Mall has the building plans downstairs. We could get a pretty accurate fix."

Maynard frowned. "It's a risky job you've cut out for yourself, Bob. They've still got a gun and bullets, you know."

"I'll go," I said, and Maynard went out to get the building plans and came back and spread them on the table. The two floors were shown in detail and there was a drawing of the room, showing the hatchway from the loft, the fire escapes and the water tank.

I put my finger on the tank.

"They were right here when I saw them this morning."

"They'd probably be on the other side this afternoon," said Doc. "They'll follow the sun." He measured the location of the tank, figured on a piece of scratch paper and aimed the tube. "Too much of an angle to cover," he said. "It's more than 60 degrees."

"Couldn't you cover part of it, then change it to cover the rest?" I asked.

"The tube would melt if we kept it burning too long," he said. "We have to concentrate in a small area."

"I'll see what I can spot for you," I said. I took a deep breath and went to the window, opening onto the fire escape.

Doc came to where I stood. "Don't take any chances."

"I understand, Doc. If I can figure out an angle, I'll tell you when I get back."

"Remember, Bob, Jack and Ruby aren't human any more."

"I'll remember," I said, but I kept telling myself they still were people. I had a deep feeling inside me that while Doc might be right in a lot of things, he hadn't quite analyzed Jack and Ruby. I put my knee on the window sill and crawled out on the fire-escape landing.

It was deathly quiet.

I moved silently and cautiously, not letting my shoes scrape the metal rungs. Reaching the top, I saw Jack and Ruby soaking up radiation on the east side of the building facing the sun.

They were about 45 degrees north of the west side of the tower, directly against the scaffolding that supported the tank. They sat side by side, with Ruby's beach cape stretched beneath them. Jack's pajama pants were still stained by

the blood he had spilled in the brush with Whitaker and Sheriff Rancy that morning and there was a brownish stain on Ruby's halter, which had slipped, exposing her right breast. She didn't act as if she cared how much of her was exposed.

It was then that I saw someone else watching. Another head protruded above the fire escape on the west side of the building. I saw it too late to duck out of sight and I held myself motionless, hoping not to be seen. I wasn't the man, Roger Mall had his eyes fixed on Jack and Ruby.

I wanted to yell but it was too late. Jack Fayburn saw him and rose, holding the pistol.

"D-don't shoot!" stammered Roger Mall.

"Do you want to die?" Jack's words were edged with ice.

"Don't shoot, Jack! I came here in peace! I want to talk to you."

"You think there are things to say?"

"Mr. Darling wants to make peace with you. Surely you'll listen."

"Of course, we'll make peace," said Ruby, who had pulled herself up to a sitting position. "On *our* terms."

"Maybe they're getting sense, after all," Jack said.

"We know what you are," Mall said. "We know that your bodies are—uh—possessed by some creature from outer space."

Jack laughed and Roger's eyes widened. "You are, aren't you?"

"No, we're not," Jack said. "It is true that we have suddenly been given powers never before possessed by mankind. But those powers have always been here on earth."

"We have new spirits," said Ruby. She spoke in a sing-song

voice, almost a chant. "We come from nowhere and from everywhere. We have crossed the gulf between that which does not know and that which does. We are alive, yet not alive. We are to live, to multiply. We know all things."

"You're crazy," Roger babbled. "Mr. Darling thought you'd be willing to talk peace terms. He thought you were intelligent—"

"Don't get the wrong idea about us, Mall," said Jack. "Ruby's letting her enthusiasm for her new way of life get the better of her."

"What are you?" Roger Mall asked. Apparently believing that Jack would talk peace, he pulled himself over the parapet and stood on the roof.

"How can I answer you?" Jack replied. "I'm Jack Fayburn; this is Ruby Cascade. That's who we are. Ruby and I don't know, any more than you know."

"But you're different!"

"So we are. Our actions are strange. We do not understand them ourselves, but we know that we must do what we do."

"What are you trying to do?"

"We are trying to live and to make way for those who come after us. Is there anything wrong with that?"

"We would be willing to give you the right to live and build for the future, but we ask you not to kill us."

Jack regarded him coldly. "We don't want to kill you. You are more valuable alive. We do only what we have to do. Ruby killed Willy Plotz when he threatened to harm me. She did not know then, as we know now, that we have the power to heal wounds—something you don't have, Mr. Mall. Whitaker was killed partly for the same reason, and partly as a warning that

we wanted privacy. I think every man has a right to defend his privacy against trespassers, don't you?"

"I suppose he does. But why Higgins?"

"Higgins was killed because he disobeyed my orders. I had to make an example of someone. Higgins was the unfortunate victim."

"Jack could have killed others," said Ruby. "He only wounded Belgard. And once today he could have killed Janet and Bob Reeve. I think he was too soft-hearted."

"Uh—Mr. Darling doesn't want you dead, Jack," said Mall. "He is ready to help you escape the consequences of your—uh—deeds, if you will accept him as a partner."

Jack stiffened. But he was no more surprised than I was. Roger Mall had come as an emissary for Darling, offering full partnership and willingness to condone three murders!

Jack said, "Does he know that under the law, my actions can hardly be considered justifiable?" He was amused.

"Darling has a great deal of money. Money speaks. Perhaps it could be established that you are—uh—not yourselves."

Jack laughed. "According to your standards, we are insane."

"Darling realizes that you cannot be stopped," said Mall. "What terms can you offer us?"

"Terms? Why should we give you anything? All we needed was time."

"And not much of that," said Ruby. "Jack and I could start this moment in carrying out our plans. But while the sun is up, we decided to take advantage of its energy-giving light."

"But surely you want something from us," Roger said, with a pleading tone in his voice. "Wouldn't it

be worth something to have our friendship?"

"Mr. Darling would put his wealth at our disposal?" Jack asked.

"Mr. Darling would give a great deal to obtain peace. And money could help your plans."

"As you say, money talks. But hardly loud enough for my purposes." He paused. "On the other hand, Mall, your proposal interests me. Certain things can be accomplished with Darling's help. How do we know that these promises he makes through you are genuine?"

Roger Mall swallowed. "He said—he said you could keep me as a hostage!" Roger was afraid. Even from where I stood, I could read it in his actions, in his voice, and in the expression on his face. I'd always looked upon Roger Mall as a yes-man, the No. 1 sycophant of Darling Aircraft, a flunky. He had risen high as a reward for losing his individuality and doing the dirty work for C. F. Darling. Here was the dirtiest job Roger Mall had ever been asked to do. Yet he was doing it. I felt sorry for him.

"Come here, Mall," said Jack.

Roger hesitated, then walked the dozen steps that separated him from Jack Fayburn. Jack seized Roger's left wrist. "You will be a hostage, as Darling says."

Ruby stepped forward to Roger's right side. "Roger Mall and C. F. Darling want peace," she said. "Let us do what we must do, Jack, and show them the way to peace."

"Not yet, Ruby," said Jack. "Janet is to be the first."

"You still are infatuated by that dimple-cheeked female! You're not fooling me. I know that no matter what you are, you still think of her as your mate. You still have longings of yesterday. We, the chosen

ones, must not be that weak."

"No!"

"Roger Mall will be the first," said Ruby shrilly. "He will be Janet Deslie's mate!"

Ruby extended her left hand, seizing Roger Mall's right wrist. There was no sound, but there was flame. It was not the flame of a glowing red fire, nor was it the licking blue flash of an electric spark. It was ebon black, the flame I had seen in the films of Jack's flight, and in the black nebula of space. Its tongues licked up from Ruby's left arm and from Jack's right arm, it washed through Roger Mall, as if his body were mist.

Roger Mall screamed as the black flame engulfed him. "Don't! Don't do this to me!"

Then his voice died down like a lost echo in a forgotten canyon. A ringing memory which would never return. Ruby dropped his right hand and Jack dropped his left hand. Roger Mall stood swaying a moment between them and then he sank to his knees.

"You are more than an ally, Roger. Now you are one of us."

"Damn you, Ruby," said Jack. "We don't need him yet—all I wanted from him was Darling's bank account."

Roger Mall's body bent forward. He looked like an Islamite at prayer.

And I knew that now we had three enemies. Roger was the third. Jack Fayburn and Ruby Cascade had reproduced their kind.

## 11. SCRATCH ONE ALIEN

RUBY, still wearing her scanty bathing suit, seated herself on the sunward side of the water tank

scaffolding. Jack, in sneakers and pajama trousers, seated himself beside her.

No attention was paid to Roger Mall, who still crouched in his huddled position near the parapet on the west side of the roof.

I went down the fire escape. Not as quietly as I came up, but a lot faster. Pat Callinan helped me in the window and I saw Sheriff Rancy talking to Maynard on the other side of the lab.

"How'd you come out?" Pat said.

I shuddered and beckoned to Maynard. He came across the room, with Sheriff Rancy at his heels. "Sit down, Bob," he said. "You look a little green."

I gulped. "There are three of them now," I said. "Roger Mall was just initiated into the Order of China Eggs."

"Roger!" Sheriff Rancy spun on his heel and looked toward the door. "I left him in the Dorm just a minute ago!"

"He's not there now," I said. "He's up on the roof. I saw the whole business."

"Tell us," said Maynard.

I gave them a detailed account. Sheriff Rancy snorted. "He said he was going to take a nap."

"Darling sent him," I told the sheriff. "Darling wanted Roger to make peace terms with them."

Maynard turned his eyes to the crude X-ray equipment. He lifted his hand and rang his long fingers through his thin, white hair. "We can't waste any more time, Sheriff. They're on the move—or will be by sundown. We've got to block all the entrances so when they enter they'll walk into our X-ray machine."

"How you gonna do that, if they can't get in?" the sheriff asked.

"We can leave one window un-

blocked. This one would be best. It would save us from having to move the X-ray equipment."

"Think that thing will stop 'em?"

"It's the most penetrating ray we can make. Nature does a better job with gammas and cosemics but we can't make them. Besides, this does something special that may be just as effective as gamma rays. X-rays have a special way of spending their energy."

I gave Pat the location of Jack and Ruby on the roof. Pat spread out the plans of the building and figured the angle between the X-ray equipment and where they were last seen. Then he adjusted the clamps that held the tube in place.

"That ought to put us on the target," he said.

Doc looked over the machine. "I don't hanker to be within sixty degrees of that tube when it's operating," he said. "It's like a leaky hose. Everything in a wide angle is apt to be sprayed. What do you say we turn it on and get out of here."

Pat nodded.

"Any danger in the store room?" the sheriff asked.

"Possibly," Pat said. "Especially around the door."

"Well, I've got to get some windows boarded up downstairs," the sheriff said. "Give me time to tear out a few shelves in the store room."

Doc nodded. "I'll help you, Sheriff."

Pat said, "I want to pump out the vacuum tube a little more. It'll give us harder rays." He looked at me. "You better leave."

"Why do you want me to go?"

"This tube isn't foolproof and there's no sense both of us risking our hides. Go nail up the Dorm

window or something. I'll turn on the machine. We might have them licked if we act now, but if we wait, we might lose 'em."

"Okay," I said, "but I can do it, too. All you do is turn on a switch. Let me stay and you beat it."

"Nothing doing. This is my job."

"It's not your job to get hurt," I said. "I'll flip you for it."

Pat pulled a quarter out of his pocket. "Okay, if you insist." He flipped the coin into the air. "Call it."

"Heads," I said. Ninety percent of the time a person will call heads when a coin is flipped in the air.

Pat's quarter came down on a little metal stand near where he was standing. Tails showed on the top side.

"Okay," I said. "But I don't like it."

"Nothin' to it," he said. "I'll stand behind the tube and I won't get hurt."

While he talked, I absent-mindedly picked up the quarter. I forgot it was his and stuffed it into my pocket.

Several security cops had come upstairs to help Sheriff Rancy and Doc Maynard tear out store-room shelves and carry them downstairs to be nailed across windows and doors.

I told Doc that I'd handle the Dormitory window and that Pat didn't need my company. Doc found me a hammer, some nails and told me to help myself to the lumber.

By the time I'd gotten half a dozen boards the right length, and nailed them across the dormitory window, the whole building echoed with pounding hammers as half a dozen men barricaded the downstairs against intruders.

I also remembered that I'd carried off Pat's quarter. An honest





The ray gun spat death and Roger Mall paid for his folly.

man's conscience never forgets, not even the swipe of a quarter.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out two quarters, one my own and the other Pat Callinan's. I knew which one was Pat's because he'd cemented a magnetized iron disc over the heads side of the coin so it would come up tails if he flipped it over a steel plate or even a large nail in the floor.

"Why the dirty crook," I said.

I went across the corridor to the lab and opened the door. I heard the pump running, but no light came from the primitive X-ray lamp. The lamp had been torn from its clamp and lay smashed on the floor. Twisted wiring lay everywhere. The generator was smoking, but it had stopped running and there was no danger of fire.

On the floor were two bodies.

Roger Mall lay still and silent. Beside him, his chest still rising and falling with labored breathing, was Pat Callinan. Blood came from a bruise on the side of his head, where he'd slammed into a table.

I dropped to my knee beside him. "Pat!"

He opened his eyes. "It worked, Bob," he said. "I stopped him." He groaned. "But I guess he stopped me, too."

I turned my head. "Doc!" I screamed. "Help!"

There was still too much noise—pounding hammers, crashing lumber—downstairs. That was why I'd heard no commotion in the lab.

Carefully I lowered Pat to the floor, went out of the room and yelled down the stairs. Janet, crossing the corridor at the foot of the stairs, heard me.

"Get Doc, quick!" I yelled. "Tell him Pat's hurt!"

She darted off to find Maynard

and I returned to Pat. He was still breathing. As I stooped over him, he opened his eyes.

"Jack . . . Ruby . . . must have sensed the radiation," he said. "Sent Roger down to shut it off . . ." He stopped, wincing in pain. He gasped.

"Don't try to talk, Pat!"

"Must," he said. "Gotta tell about it."

"Maynard will be here in a minute."

"Saw Roger through window," Pat said. "Remembered you said he was like . . . them. I turned beam on him. Really hurt him . . . I could tell. He busted window and came in . . ."

I heard footsteps coming up the stairs.

"Used to be football player . . ." Pat's mouth twisted almost into a grin. "I stopped him . . . hung on . . . he slugged, kicked like a mule. Knocked me into table . . . over there . . ." He tried to point. The effort was too much. His head fell back. "I held him under the tube . . . X-rays finished him." He closed his eyes as Maynard and Janet came through the door. "Guess we kicked over the lamp in the final struggle."

Maynard examined the wound. "Skull isn't fractured," he said. He pointed to red and black splotches on his shoulder and neck where his shirt had been torn away. "Bad burns, though. Better get him downstairs." He smiled at Pat, who opened his eyes. "You'll pull through."

"Glad," he said. He looked up at me. "I made that quarter to do muleheads like you out of doing things that were really my job."

Some security cops came into the room. They got Pat into a chair and carried him down the stairs.

Janet went into the Dorm, got bedding and followed them.

Maynard looked at the smashed lamp after they left. "Our only weapon," he said. "We haven't time to make another."

"Everyone would help," I said.

"No parts," he said, picking up the hammer I'd dropped when I came into the room. "Barricade this window, Bob. We'll all go downstairs for the last stand." From his tone, I knew we were worse off than the jackrabbits and the buffalo. We were dead dodos. We didn't have a chance.

I tore down more shelves and barricaded the window while Doc got his notes together.

"What'll we do downstairs, Doc?" I asked, as I finished the barricade. He shrugged. "What can we do?"

"Plenty," I said. "Pat fought Roger Mall with his bare hands and killed him."

"He had X-rays to help him."

"At least it proves they're mortal," I said. "That's a lot more than I believed an hour ago."

"We'll fight 'em with our bare hands," Doc said. "And with whatever weapons we can find."

Downstairs, Janet and Adolph Vanderwal had fixed Pat up on some desks pushed together in the office. A mattress had been spread and he was covered with a sheet.

Doc pulled his whiskey bottle out and handed it to Lucy. "Give him some of this," he said.

In spite of his pain, Pat grinned. "A pretty nurse and some whiskey. Glory be!"

I felt a little proud of the human race. I hoped we'd put up as good a front as Pat was doing.

Even though we knew that Jack and Ruby were vulnerable now we were no better off—our only weapon had been destroyed.

## 12. BATTLE PLANS

SHERIFF RANCY went into a huddle with Colonel Van Haber in the cafeteria, on a defense strategy. Although Van Haber was more of an engineer than a military man, he had received some strategic training.

Two-by-fours had been nailed across the trap door leading to the attic. While these might not stop Jack and Ruby, they would make enough noise tearing them down to give us warning of impending attack. We wouldn't be taken by surprise.

Adolph stationed one of his men at the top of the stairs. Another he put in the office with Janet and Pat Callinan. A third security cop was stationed in the rear of the building, to watch the corridor and the kitchen; a fourth cop was near the front door.

Sheriff Rancy had some pointed remarks for J. C.

"I don't know what your idea was, Darling, trying to sell out to Jack Fayburn. Fayburn is a law breaker, a murderer. I don't care if he's got sixteen men from Mars hiding in his belly, or whether he's crazy, or got a virus, or a new form of electricity. The only peace he can make is with a jury. So get rid of any other ideas."

"I didn't realize—"

"I know you didn't, but I'm tellin' you, see? Besides you got a man killed. I'll take Bob's word for it, Jack Fayburn did something to him, and that was what made him attack young Callinan. But hereafter, when you got any ideas, come to me. I'm the law here."

Darling sat at a table in the cafeteria, staring into space. I felt a little sorry for him and got a cup

of coffee from the urn "Would you like some hot java, boss?"

He looked at me. "Nobody should do things for me, Bob. About all I've done so far has been to foul things up."

"Don't feel sorry for yourself. We all make mistakes."

He snorted. "I'd fire a man for doing some of the things I've done. My mistake cost a life. It may have cost all of us our lives, because Maynard can't build another X-ray tube. According to him it was the only weapon that had any hope of success."

I said nothing. If the boss wanted to bawl himself out, it was okay with me.

"I really had no idea it would be dangerous for Roger," he went on. "I thought Jack would talk to him. I thought Mall might make some sort of agreement. Of course, Roger intended to talk to me before he agreed to anything." He straightened. "What kind of a guy do you think I am, Bob?"

I looked at him. A lot of third generation industrialists might be riding along on their dad's and grandad's coat tails, but not C. F. Darling.

"You're okay," I said.

"You don't mean it."

"Listen, boss," I said. "If I didn't like working for you, I wouldn't. I'm good enough to get a job I like to work at, so I can quit any time I please—present circumstances excepted. But outside the usual griping, which is a working man's privilege no matter what job he's on, I'm satisfied with you and my job." I grinned. "Does that answer your question?"

"Thanks," he said. "But look at me now. I'm the head of one of the biggest aviation outfits in the

world." He nodded toward Rancy, Vanderwal and Van Haber. "And they don't think I'm competent to lead my men in this emergency."

"Maybe you didn't try."

"No, I played the coward's trick of trying to join the enemy. That's good business, but not good war. I like some of my competitors. When I beat 'em, it's like winning a game of golf. Costlier, maybe, but they hand me a licking now and then so we all take it like gentlemen. But this is war. And I was trying to make separate peace."

"Believe me, boss," I said, "if we could make peace with whatever Jack and Ruby are, it would be smart to do it. Nobody blames you for trying. Nor for your beliefs."

Some of Darling's old vigor seemed to sweep over him. He got up, surged over to the council of war between the peace officers and Colonel Van Haber. For lack of anything else to do I joined them.

C. F. took off his glasses and put them into his pocket. "Boys," he said, "let's stage the best fight we can."

"We're all in agreement on that, C. F.," said Van Haber. "Trouble is, we don't know how to do it."

"We've got guns, fists and clubs," said C. F.

"Guns aren't any good," said Sheriff Rancy. "And you can't use your fists or a club when the other fellow has a gun."

Darling pulled out a chair and sat down beside Colonel Van Haber. I sat down at the next table, trying to be unobtrusive as possible.

"Colonel," said Darling, "from a military standpoint, what are the best tactics to use?"

"It depends on whether we're the superior or inferior force," said the colonel. "Usually when a larger force engages a smaller force, it

tries to contain the inferior group and overwhelm it. On the other hand, when a smaller force meets a larger one, it is advantageous to get in a position where the large group can't use its full strength."

Darling nodded.

"If Custer had been able to retreat into a narrow canyon," the colonel went on, "or put his men in a spot where Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse couldn't throw thousands against his hundred or so, he might have won the battle."

"We're not Custer," said Darling. "And we're not Sitting Bull."

"There are classical actions of all kinds between unequal forces. Athenian hoplites routing 20,000 Persians at Marathon. Leonidas and 1500 Greeks against Xerxes at Thermopylae. Hernando Cortes conquered Mexico with only a handful of men. The problem here seems to be whether we are the large force that should seek to contain and annihilate a small force, or the small force defending against a larger one."

Van Haber paused then went on.

"Counting numbers, we are superior. However, under no circumstances could we bring all our strength together at one time against Jack and Ruby. Our men would be getting in each other's way. Furthermore, all of our contacts with the—ah—enemy, seem to point up the fact that they have abnormal strength. It's doubtful that enough of us could tackle one of them at one time to—ah—neutralize him."

"Then what do you suggest, Colonel?" Darling asked.

"In a situation like this," said the colonel, "the strategic thing is to retreat, feel out the enemy, find out his weaknesses."

"My God, colonel," said Darling,

"we can't retreat. We've felt out the enemy and he hasn't got any weaknesses."

"Then," said Colonel Van Haber, "I suggest we all eat a hearty dinner and say our prayers."

"I'm glad we had George Washington instead of you during the Revolution," said Darling. "We've got guns. What's to stop us from using them?"

"As Mr. Vanderwal says, the guns are a liability," said the colonel. "I'm in favor of dismantling them."

Darling stood up. "Whether a bullet kills them or knocks them down, like a punch to the jaw, I don't imagine they enjoy getting shot," he said. "And we've got a lot more bullets than they have."

The colonel studied the table top for a moment. "Your point is a good one." He looked at Sheriff Rancy. "How about it, Sheriff?"

The sheriff nodded and looked up at Darling. "Enough bullets might do the trick," he said.

"There's one point, though," said the colonel. "We have to make certain that our weapons don't fall into their hands. One bullet is fatal for us."

"Right!" said Sheriff Rancy. "Sit down, Darling. Let's work this thing out."

Darling grinned at the men around the table, reached into his pocket and lit a cigar. Then he put on his glasses, "I'll wear 'em till we start fighting," he said. "I can see better."

Our defenses were formulated simply. The "last stand" would be made in the cafeteria. Tables, turned on edge, would be arranged in three lines of defense across the room.

Pat Callinan, his head and arms

covered with bandages, was brought into the cafeteria by Janet and a security cop. He was in a great deal of pain, but Dr. Maynard's whiskey was helping. The other officers who had been posted as look-outs also were summoned to join our group. There were now fifteen of us, counting Pat and Janet.

Adolph brought the arms and ammunition out of the office and passed them around. Maynard's shotgun was given to Doc, who took up a post behind the coffee urn behind the cafeteria steam table.

Coloney Van Haber, Sheriff Rancy and two of the security cops were behind the tables directly in front of the door. Adolph, the remaining two cops, Darling and myself were in the second line. Herman, his two stewards, Janet and Pat were installed behind the last line of tables.

"The orders are to retreat if any line is breached," Colonel Van Haber said. "Don't let Jack or Ruby touch you at any cost. One touch may be enough to contaminate. Make every shot count and load your guns as fast as they are emptied."

To make sure of a steady fire, Sheriff Rancy suggested Indian fighter tactics. Half of each group was to hold its fire till the other half exhausted its ammunition. By keeping up a steady fire in this manner, there would be no slackening in defense while the entire group reloaded.

To avoid inflicting casualties on ourselves, the colonel cautioned those in the rear lines against firing at all, until the line ahead had been overrun by the enemy.

One of the two stewards was stationed outside the entrance to guard against surprise, although

none of us believed it was likely. Any way Jack and Ruby entered the building, they would make noise.

I looked at my watch. It was after 7 o'clock. The sun was sinking in the west and the attack could come any time. Herman passed out sandwiches and brewed another urn of coffee. I filled my cup and stood beside the steam table talking to Maynard.

"Do you think we've got a chance?" I asked him.

Doc drew himself a cup of coffee and poured cream into it. His glasses slid down on his nose as he studied the steaming brew. "Maybe, I don't know."

"If you don't know, nobody else does. You're the only man here who has the slightest idea what we're up against."

"We're up against something that hasn't happened more than twice in the history of the world before today," he said. "A combination of events, at the right instant, at the right spot, produced life."

Slowly the room grew quiet. The expressions changed to interest as every face turned toward Maynard.

"Tell us what it is, Doc," said Darling.

Maynard sipped his coffee again and cleared his throat. "We're dealing with living energy," he said. "Until a few hours ago I was completely baffled. It was something I couldn't comprehend. It was outside my scientific experience.

"Science has studied most kinds of radiant energy—from long wave radio down to cosmic rays. All kinds of energy. There didn't seem to be any others left, yet we found one.

"And we also found a new kind of matter—"

I heard Darling's sharp intake of breath. "You didn't tell us about that!" he said.

"The shell of the china egg," Doc said quietly. "That puzzled me too. The periodic table has been filled and while we might develop a few more artificial elements of extremely high atomic weight, all the gaps from Hydrogen to the recently discovered elements 99 and 100—einsteinium and fermium—have been filled, along with all of the possible isotopes, excepting Helium 5, which is a special case.\*

"But we'll return to the shell presently. Let's consider the new type of energy which has been shown to be life itself. A creature that could not build its own body for lack of materials and had to borrow one; a creature that must even borrow other bodies in order to reproduce itself, is after all our enemy. And it is so formidable that it threatens our existence. It is foreseeable that it could bring man—as we know him—to extinction."

The room was deathly quiet now.

"You wonder where this energy came from." Doc Maynard gazed from face to face. "I believe energy is eternal and indestructible. When it seems to be annihilated by creation of matter it is really in storage, ready to appear when matter is destroyed. Therefore this energy which we call life always has been and always will be in the universe, in one form or another.

"When a proton, which carries a positive electrical charge, unites with an electron, which is negative, an atom of hydrogen is created.

\* Helium 5, an isotope, has never been created and there is doubt that it exists, although Helium 3, which has a half-life of eight-tenths of a second, has been produced artificially. Helium 4 occurs in nature. The reason Helium 5 probably is non-existent is because it involves a neutron in an unstable position.

Several atoms of hydrogen can be brought together to form helium, plus energy. This is the basis of the hydrogen bomb.

"Certain physicists, such as Arthur Eddington, have pointed to an apparent entropy, a tendency of available energy in a system to reach a state of equilibrium. But there is a growing belief that what appears to be a loss may reappear elsewhere and the total always remains the same."

Darling was growing uneasy. "Does this have a bearing on our problem, Doc?" he asked.

"It's background, C. F.," said Maynard. "I'll cut it short if it bores you. What I'm trying to show is that certain phases of atomic physics are not fully understood, even though we understand the fundamentals. Enrico Fermi, who pioneered in atom splitting, proposed a sub-atomic particle called the neutrino to explain contradictions in the law of conservation of energy. We have only indirect evidence to support its existence because it is too near nothing to be detected.

"There is another discrepancy in the binding energy of an atom, which is less than we expected. Something lies in the atom yet to be discovered. Perhaps the neutrino is evidence that there is a negative phase to matter and if there is a negative—or mirror-matter, there must also be mirror-energy, for matter is created from energy.

"This is not dreaming or idle speculation. Many scientific minds have dug into the problem. There is also the recent suggestion of Professor Norman F. Ramsey of Harvard that the laws of thermodynamics—the most sacred of physics—be worked out anew to

deal with temperatures below absolute zero—minus 273.1 degrees Centigrade. This seems to me to be another pointer in the direction of mirror energy. Heat is energy and *absolute zero* is supposed to be the temperature without heat. If something can be colder than *absolute zero*, there must be a negative direction to energy.

"To avoid confusion I will call it mirror energy to distinguish from positive and negative charges in electricity.

"Now to get directly to our problem. Supposing a negative proton, which is called an anti-proton, combines with a positive electron, called a positron. The logical result would be mirror hydrogen. There is no evidence that mirror hydrogen can be or will be or ever has been produced. In fact, the discovery of the anti-proton was announced only in 1955, so there has been little exploration in that direction as yet.

"The position is well known and has been obtained from X-rays and gamma rays as well as certain natural radiation.

"Mirror hydrogen would have a negative valence, instead of positive, and would combine with mirror oxygen to form  $\text{OH}_2$  or mirror water, which is  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$ . We might be able to combine mirror elements with natural elements to get unheard of hybrid materials, such a thing as sodium hydride  $\text{NaH}$ , or chlorine oxide  $\text{OCl}_2$ . Both of these are impossible as we know chemistry on one side of the mirror.

"I am convinced that the shell of the china egg is one of these hybrid compounds. It was created when the black mirror energy went through the plastic glass in the canopy of the XDW-49. Now the energy inside of it was free energy, existing in the ionosphere, which is char-

acterized by free electrical charges resulting from air atoms being broken up by ultra-violet and cosmic radiation.

"The pressure was low, being less than one-tenth of a pound per square foot and therefore there were only a few bits of matter in which this energy could be stored. The XDW-49 must have created some sort of a field that excited this energy which swept toward the plane carrying with it a debris of mirror-atoms, positrons and anti-protons. When this energy struck the plexiglass, the mirror particles combined with shattered atoms to produce a hard covering, trapping energy inside.

"The energy was immediately drawn toward Jack Fayburn. Don't ask me how. But I think extra sensory perception will explain a lot of things like this when it is fully understood.

"Suddenly, as the energy entered Jack Fayburn, life began, just as it did when lightning struck an ionized solution of salt water in a tidal basin on earth one or two billion years ago. A new kind of life, not life as we know it, began yesterday.

"More than energy is needed for life. When the accident happened on earth before, there were other atoms present which lent themselves to a chemical chain reaction that hasn't stopped yet. The life energy was able to surround itself with atoms that kept the energy alive. As long as it could continue the process of feeding itself, it would survive, barring accident. And to protect itself against accident, the original life cell divided into two cells so that if one were destroyed the other would survive. Presently each of the two divided



and in a very short time the earth was inhabited by simple life, which evolved into higher forms.

"Yesterday the life energy had to feed to exist. It unerringly sought out the proper materials for life—Jack Fayburn. And it also sensed that one organism was not enough, but there must be another somewhere to provide a continuing chain reaction in the form of reproduction. One egg remained unhatched till it reached the ground, and immediately set upon the first female it perceived, Ruby Cascade."

Maynard picked up his coffee cup, tasted it, found that the coffee had cooled and put the cup aside.

"Now let's look at what happened when the first egg attacked Jack. His body already was charged with life and the result was an overload. The human body is a transformer for life energy and an overloaded transformer breaks down unless there is an immediate relief of surplus energy. The surplus which was drained off might have included a mixture of Jack's own life energy and that of the china egg. More than likely it was mostly Jack. In either event, the life in Jack now, is no longer the original Jack Fayburn. A large part is an alien life at least two billion years younger. It has no more feeling toward us, or the original energy of Jack Fayburn and Ruby Cascade than we have for a weed." Maynard paused, but no questions came. In order to ask a question, you must know about the subject.

"All day today, Jack and Ruby absorbed additional energy from the sun, converting it into their own special kind, just as we convert sunlight for our use. Now they are ready to reproduce their kind. They already did this successfully this afternoon, but Pat

Callinan destroyed their first-born with X-rays.

"This mirror energy is especially vulnerable to X-rays because they, and gamma radiation, give up their energy in pair formation. A gamma photon splits into an electron and positron, negative and positive particles. These are absorbed immediately by free electrons and protons. I hoped that mirror energy might be broken down by bombarding it with something that produced a mirror particle, such as the positron. As you know, my hopes were realized but the X-ray machine was destroyed. Our own life force no doubt has a certain amount of immunity, which accounts for Pat being still alive."

"If a little damaged," said Pat, his voice muffled by bandages.

Again I recalled the black area about the cathode in the X-ray tube. There was the blackout of film in my camera. The black flame engulfed Roger Mall, and the mirror universes were black. Mirror radiation was black—as it should be.

Maynard continued. "Bob Reeve has just asked me if I thought we had a chance against this negative life." He looked from face to face. The tenseness was gone, and the faces were interested. The people standing here seemed to forget that they might not have long to live.

"I think we have. Jack and Ruby must have absorbed some of the X-rays or they would not have sent Roger Mall down to find out what was happening. In that case they might be weakened, but they had much in reserve after a day in the sunlight. If we can weaken them further, by forcing them to expend energy in healing wounds, we may be able to fight them on even terms,

or possibly win out against them. Our chances are slim, but they're the only chances we have. I for one, will do my best, give my life if necessary to try to stop them."

Heads nodded and Darling said, "Amen."

Darling removed his glasses. "I'm ready."

Maynard took off his specs. "And so am I."

Sheriff Rancy spit out his gum, and unwrapped a new stick in a grim, determined gesture.

At that moment we heard the crashing of timbers. The sound came from the north door of the Barracks.

Jack and Ruby were on their way.

### 13. SLAUGHTER IN KANSAS

**P**EDRO, the little Mexican steward and jack of all jobs, plunged through the cafeteria doorway from the corridor, where he had been stationed as a lookout.

"They come, Senor Darling!" he yelled.

Pedro scrambled around the steam tables to his post beside Herman and the other steward, Carlos. Sheriff Rancy had already given Pedro a gun, a snub-nosed Colt Cobra, which because of its light weight the little fellow could be expected to handle with ease. Carlos had a similar weapon, while Herman, a bigger man, used one of the Regulation Police .38's.

Sheriff Rancy had given men his Trooper, and taken, in its place, a Colt Government Model .45 automatic, which had punch enough to knock down a mule. Adolph had one like it. There were no other .45's, but Darling had armed him-

self with a .38 Super automatic, which was almost as deadly.

Dr. Maynard shook his head when he was offered a revolver and selected his own shotgun. "Can't hit the broadside of a building with anything else," he said. He snapped off the safety and pumped a shell into the barrel.

All the security cops had their regular arms, Troopers or Regulation Police models. Another Cobra had been found for Janet, although she admitted knowing nothing about firearms. Adolph showed her how to pull the trigger and point it and said that it was the best they had with which she could defend herself.

"Hope I won't have to use it," she said grimly.

After the first crash on the north door, there had been no more sounds from that side of the building. Then we heard the motor of the jeep which Higgins had used. There was a crashing thump on the south door and Jack backed the jeep for another try.

Suddenly the radio in the kitchen blared like a politician's sound truck. The defective volume control had shorted with the jar given the building by the jeep.

Herman started toward the kitchen, but Maynard waved him back. "Leave it alone," he said. "It won't hurt anything."

The music continued to blare, the irony of radiant energy which powered the thing. It seemed to mock us for our audacity to face beings who were powered with energy of a similar kind.

The jeep crashed into the door again. This time the wood splintered and cracked. Jack's wild yell echoed outside and he gunned the motor and tore the door away. The

jeep's engine died and we waited breathlessly.

"Can he come through the kitchen?" Maynard asked.

"Door's locked," said Herman.

"That wouldn't stop him," Maynard said.

But Jack didn't come that way. He was confident of victory, so why waste time? We heard the soft tread of his sneakers and the slap of Ruby's beach sandals coming toward the cafeteria door.

"Make your bullets count," said Van Haber softly. "Enough hits might win our war."

We didn't need to be told. Everyone was hoping bullets would win.

Sheriff Rancy spit out his gun.

Then they appeared in the doorway. Jack first, grinning—naked to the waist, his pajamas torn, bloody and dirty. In his right hand he held Whitaker's gun.

Ruby followed him, her orange hair uncombed, face devoid of cosmetics, skin streaked with dirt; obviously not human, but fascinating in some horrible manner. She had left her beach robe behind, and stood dressed only in the scanty bathing suit.

Jack's gun swept the three lines of determined men who faced him. He said, "Drop your guns, stand quietly, all of you."

"What do you propose to do with us?" said Van Haber.

"Your lot will not be bad. I offer you a new life, a new world, a new spirit."

"That's what we're afraid of," said Maynard.

"How about it, Darling?" Jack asked, pointing his gun at C. F.

"Go to hell," said Darling. He pulled the trigger of his gun.

The bullet knocked Jack back

against the door frame. He hung onto his pistol and fired, but the shot was wasted. An instant later, Van Haber's .45 automatic bucked and spat. Jack shuddered as another bullet plowed into his chest. He was leaning against the wall or he would have gone down.

The next instant, Ruby sprang forward and tried to seize the gun but Van Haber fired again and she went down.

Jack leveled his pistol and fired. Van Haber groaned and caught hold of the table. He wavered a second, then fell forward, dropping his gun in front of the barricade.

Ruby tried to wriggle toward it, but Sheriff Rancy fired and her body jerked as another .45 slug tore into her.

The sheriff tried to retrieve the automatic dropped by the colonel but Jack fired again and Rancy clutched at his right arm with his left hand. He pulled the gun from his numbed fingers and threw it back across the room toward Herman. It dropped in front of the last row of tables.

Cursing, the sheriff picked up Van Haber's gun, just as Jack dived upon him. Rancy wriggled out of Jack's grasp and threw the second gun. Jack swung his fist and the sheriff went down.

The others couldn't fire with the fighting hand to hand, but as Rancy hit the floor, the two security cops opened on Jack, aided by Darling who was climbing over the second line of tables to take the place of the fallen men. The fire poured into Jack, who was hammered back against the steam table. Suddenly Ruby rose up from the floor swinging a chair. The first of the security cops went down and the second pulled back for an instant.

This was all that Jack needed. As Darling turned to fire at Ruby, Jack threw another chair that caught Darling on the back of the head and sent him down.

The remaining security cop reached down, picked up his partner's pistol, and with a gun in each hand walked straight at Jack, firing as he went, smashing him back. Then tossing one of his empty guns aside, he reached down and picked up Darling's automatic.

At this instant, Ruby swung the chair again. Even as he toppled, the cop instinctively hurled the gun out of reach.

A new roar came to my ears and I saw Doc Maynard with his shotgun at his shoulder pumping shells and firing them right into Jack's back.

The skin of Jack's back and shoulders was shredded by the blasts and Jack pitched forward face down.

This time Ruby hurled a table and Maynard dropped his gun and slid to the floor.

I started to climb over the tables but Adolph yelled, "Stay where you are!" His own gun was busy now.

I stopped and triggered my own gun. It snapped empty and I reached for Van Haber's automatic.

As I straightened I saw Ruby beating one of the security cops over the head with a table leg while Adolph emptied his pistol. My automatic kicked and Ruby went down.

I turned and saw Jack struggling to rise. His back was still torn by the shot from Maynard's pump gun, but beneath the gore I saw the skin writhing to close the wounds.

Jack and Ruby had been hit a score of times, yet they were fighting as viciously as at the start.

I realized suddenly that I was

firing without aiming and my bullets were missing Jack as he tried to get on his feet. He reached down, picked up a leg of shattered table and started toward me. Adolph had emptied his gun and was starting to reload. Ruby was getting up and if Jack and Ruby closed in together, we'd be lost.

I stepped back and pointed to his companion's pistol on the floor. "Get that gun!" I yelled.

Adolph started to obey but Ruby brought down her club.

The cop sank to the floor. I blasted with the automatic, knocking Ruby aside long enough for me to reach the gun.

"Behind you, Bob!" I heard Janet scream. I turned, saw Jack with an upraised table leg. I turned and emptied my automatic at him and he missed. He caught himself against the steam table and came back after me. He was getting stronger!

Adolph was too slow getting his gun loaded and Ruby knocked him to the floor with her club. I was the only man standing in the second line. I drew back, my automatic empty, and only the revolver in my hand.

Jack was coming toward me with the table upraised. I emptied the revolver. He staggered, then came on. He should have been dead, but he wouldn't die.

*You couldn't kill them.*

With me out of the line of fire, Herman and the two stewards and Pat Callinan were blasting—and missing. Janet had her gun going too, but even as I watched she put a hole in the coffee urn. Somebody, Jack or Ruby, I don't know which, threw a chair and Pat went down, screaming with agony from his X-ray burns.

Then suddenly the firing ceased. The guns of the others were empty. They had done the thing that Van Haber had warned against—exhausted their ammunition all at once. Not a single gun could be fired against the foe that could not be killed.

On the floor I saw Sheriff Rancy's automatic and I dived toward it. As I got my fingers around the grip, something struck me on the head. I tried to check my fall, but the room was whirling and I couldn't stay upright. Then Jack bent over me and wrenched Rancy's automatic from my hand. Three shots broke the silence and there were thuds of three bodies falling. Herman and his two stewards were gone.

Vainly I tried to pull myself up, but my arms seemed to be made of rubber. "Bob!" Janet screamed.

"Is your gun empty, Janet?" Jack asked quietly. "In any case, you'd better drop it. I don't want to shoot you."

I heard Janet's gun thud on the floor. "It's empty," she said.

"Ruby!" Jack called. The beach sandals slid past my head. "Take her hand."

Ruby's voice came harshly to my ears. "Kill her," she said. "There are other women in the world."

#### 14. THE BLOODY FIELD

**G**RITTING my teeth, I made another effort to get to my feet. I managed to rise to a crouching position.

"Look out, Jack!" Ruby said. "Bob Reeve is coming around!"

Looking up, I saw Jack turn with the automatic in his hand. "I've got his gun," he said. He waved the

weapon toward me. "Take it easy, Bob, or I'll finish the job."

I remained motionless in my crouching position.

Jack turned his head. "How many are alive?" he asked Ruby.

She looked around the room. "Only five or six are dead," she said. "But some of them are badly hurt."

"We can fix the wounded ones," said Jack. He turned back toward Janet. "But we transform her first."

Ruby almost snarled as she replied. "Not on your immortal life, Jack Fayburn. I know what that woman meant to you, and you're mine—now!"

Jealousy was even stronger than the black energy within her.

"Janet first, I say!" Jack reached out with his left hand and seized Janet's wrist. She shrank back and tried to pull herself away, but Jack's grip was too strong.

"What are you trying to do, start a harem?" asked Ruby. "You think I don't realize that there's some of the old Jack Fayburn left! I know, because there's some of Ruby Cascade in me!"

It was a mixture then. The black energy in the china egg hadn't driven out the original life force, but had mixed. Maynard had said something about an Achilles' heel.

"Jack!" I said.

Slowly he turned his unblinking eyes on me. "What do you want?" he asked. He released his grip on Janet's wrist.

"This position's damned uncomfortable. Can't I stand up?"

He looked inquiringly at Ruby. My eyes followed his. Ruby wasn't interested in what I did, she wanted to see Janet dead.

"Okay, Bob," he said. "Get up. We'll tend to you in a minute.

Maybe I can make peace with this—with Ruby here, if I earmark you for Janet." I rose to a standing position.

Ruby tapped her beach slipper impatiently on the floor. "You're not kidding me, Jack Fayburn," she said.

The volume of the radio in the kitchen sank low again and the room grew quiet. Someone, probably Sheriff Rancy, groaned.

Suddenly I heard sounds in the corridor. Jack wheeled and through the door came Dr. Grant, followed by several mechanics and security cops.

"We heard shooting—" Dr. Grant stopped as he looked into the barrel of the automatic.

"There'll be more of it," Jack said, "if any of you haven't heard enough."

Dr. Grant's eyes widened as he saw the bodies on the floor. I shook my head as his eyes fell on me. "Don't do anything," I said. "We emptied guns into him and into Ruby, and it did no good. You can't kill them."

Jack nodded. "Nice going, Bob." He spoke now to Grant. "You heard what he said. Come in and line up against the wall."

Dr. Grant and two mechanics came through the door. The rest turned and I heard their footsteps going down the corridor.

They were the smart ones for running away. But I wondered how long before they and everyone on earth would be hunted down and transformed by the black nebula from the china egg.

"Jack," I said quietly.

Jack turned his unblinking gaze at me. "I'm listening, Bob."

"There's a lot going to depend on what you do in the next two or three minutes." The room was

deathly quiet. The only sound was the death rattle of the security cop with a broken head.

"You can't stop what I'm going to do, Bob," Jack said. "And what I have to do is—necessary."

"Is it necessary?"

Jack seemed to be trying to avert his gaze, but I held some sort of attraction for him. He seemed to be struggling with himself.

I talked some more. "Ruby said there was some of the old Jack Fayburn left—and there may be some of the Ruby too."

"Not much of her, I'm afraid," said Jack. His voice was not shrill, but like his old voice now. "I'm something you can never understand, Bob. Not while you are as you are."

"I do understand my old friend Jack Fayburn," I said. "He was the kind of guy who wouldn't get mad if you borrowed his last clean shirt, or you would forgive if he borrowed yours. He wasn't afraid of flying a plane two hundred thousand feet above the earth."

"I'm still not afraid," Jack said. "And we'll still be pals—in a few minutes."

"The Jack I knew was in love with Janet Deslie," I said quietly.

He seemed to shudder.

"Were you, Jack?" Janet asked from behind him.

"Damn her!" The snarl came from Ruby. She took a step toward Jack. He pushed her back, roughly.

Ruby turned on me. "What are you trying to do?" she said. "Hearts and flowers won't work with Jack and me. We're above such things!"

"I'm not so sure, Ruby!" The voice was C. F. Darling's. His head, covered with blood, rose from behind the table in front of me.

Ruby tossed her shaggy, uncombed hair.

Darling tried to rise, but he sank back to the floor.

"You loved Janet, Jack," I said. "Now would you make her something that isn't human, like yourself?"

Jack blinked and down his left cheek ran a maudlin little tear.

"Jack!" Ruby snarled. "Can't you see what he's trying to do to you?"

"Trouble is, Ruby," Fayburn said "He's doing it!"

He started toward Ruby. She shrank back.

"Something went wrong when that little china egg picked on me," he said. "It didn't quite take. There's a lot of the old me left!"

"The china egg picked on a man," I said. "A real man, who had energy in his body to fight back. You're the only one in the world who can save us, Jack!"

He seemed to have weights on his feet as he took his next step. He did not have full control of his body. He tried to walk, but his feet would not move. His arms stretched out, but he could not reach Ruby.

Sweat and tears rolled down his face as he exerted every muscle to move. Finally he lifted one foot and brought it forward. He reached out, but Ruby stepped back.

All over the room, forms of the men that lived were slowly rising, watching the grim scene in the corner of the dining room.

Sheriff Rancy, dragging his useless right arm, had pulled himself up over the wreckage. The battered security cops, Darling, and Adolph were watching. Behind the steam table, Dr. Maynard had pulled himself up so that he could

see. Only Van Haber, one of the security cops, Herman and his two stewards, failed to rise. They would never rise again.

Jack took another laborious step and Ruby shrank back to the wall. "Don't touch me!" she hissed. "*Don't touch me!*"

And Jack took another step.

He lifted a tired arm, and then another arm and reached. His fingers brushed the halter that hung askew on her rounded breasts.

He leaned forward and toppled and his fingers clung grasping on her arms.

Ruby screamed.

And black flame rose between them. It seemed to encompass the two figures.

In the kitchen, the radio blared, but it was not the music of disc jockeys or of any musicians on earth. It was weird beatless rhythm, the pulsations of starlit space, of black energy that man cannot detect even with his finest instruments. It was the entropy of life that was created, rose, and died in the space of twenty-nine hours.

The flame leaped upward, like a bolt of lightning and crashed out through the wall. Thunder pealed and the radio sang its weird music.

Jack and Ruby collapsed on the floor.

Dr. Grant moved cautiously to where they had fallen. His hands dropped to Jack's neck. He felt a moment, then he touched the same spot under Ruby's jaw.

"No pulse," he said.

He leaned down and with his head on Jack's bare, bloody chest, he listened for a heart beat. Then he listened for Ruby's.

Dr. Grant slowly straightened as C. F. Darling pulled himself up from the floor.

"Dead," said Dr. Grant. "They're both as dead as carrion."

## 15. NO FINAL VICTORY

**T**HIRTY minutes later the State Highway Patrol arrived. Fifteen minutes after that an Airforce Plane from Colorado Springs came in.

The pilot who had brought the films had had a tough time convincing everyone that something was wrong, but eventually, when no phone connection could be made, someone had gotten curious.

Dr. Bundy, the coroner, made another trip to the base and after listening to Sheriff Rancy, whose broken arm had been set, he decided that he'd get a stenographer and have everything down on paper during the inquest the next day.

Except for some damaged heads, and the bullet wound that Sheriff Rancy suffered, the rest of us were in fair shape.

Seven persons had died in the pitched battle of the Barracks dining room. These included Jack and Ruby, of course, although to my way of thinking they had already been dead, except for the fraction that remained of Jack, and the minute portion of Ruby, which enabled them to conquer themselves.

Added to these deaths were those of Willy Plotz, Higgins, Whitaker and Roger Mall. A total of eleven, a third of our original number, had been lost.

The inquest was held and it was just a rehash of what had occurred, plus some of Dr. Maynard's explanations. Some military men from Fort Riley and Colorado Springs came down and listened and asked for a transcript of the

inquest testimony. Don't ask me what they intended to do with it because it's probably a classified secret by now.

The Airforce man from Colorado Springs seemed much more interested in the XDW-49 than in the explanations of mirror-life given by Dr. Maynard. So Janet and I drove Doc to Salina after the inquest and we found a place that served beer. It was 3.2 beer, which is about the only thing containing alcohol, except buttermilk, that you can buy in a public place in Kansas.

We listened to Doc.

"The energy didn't drive out all of the original Jack Fayburn and Ruby Cascade, as I thought it had," Doc said. "I should have known that because a dry cell doesn't drive out the energy in others it happens to be hooked up with. Part of Jack and part of Ruby remained. I can't explain how it happened any more than I can explain the laws of conservation of energy. But the new stuff was enough to control their actions. They were like overcharged batteries or transformers, or an overloaded electronic circuit. It was only when Jack got excited—the old Jack, I mean—that the transformer broke down."

"Electronics reminds me," I said. "How's Pat doing?"

Pat had been taken to Asbury hospital in Salina, along with other cases that needed treatment after the battle.

"Fine," said Doc. "The burns weren't as serious as we thought at first. Otherwise he's in good shape."

"What happened to the radio?" Janet asked. "That was the weirdest music I ever heard."

Maynard laughed. "Thirty years ago we'd have called it 'funny



static'. I think it was mirror radiation as Jack and Ruby died. There was an odd idea advanced some years ago when the idea of entropy was at its peak."

Dr. Maynard lifted his beer bottle and poured more into his glass.

"I think I mentioned entropy before—it's the energy in the universe reaching a state of equilibrium. All the atoms would be energy of extremely long wavelength. Longer than the longest electromagnetic waves we know of today."

"Sounds like the end of everything," I said.

"That's exactly what it was intended to sound like," said Maynard. "The end of the universe would result in extremely long radiation. And do you know what kind?"

"No," I said.

"Of course not," Janet said. "We're dumb."

"This tremendously long radiation would be radio waves. In other words, the end of the universe would be a big broadcast."

We laughed, but just the same the idea gave me a little shiver. Besides, I didn't want my soul to wind up in a radio performance. Much better it would be television at least.

Another question bothered me.

"Doc," I said, "since you believe energy never disappears, what became of Jack and Ruby?"

"When we know, we'll know all the secrets we can ever discover," Maynard said. "The old Jack and Ruby are where good souls go. The black energy which threatened us may be still around. Its mirror-photons wait in some mirror atoms. Or in mirror-light, mirror-heat, sparks of mirror electricity. Or it may still be black energy of life. It could return sometime."

"I hope it never does," said Janet with a shiver.

"It could come back next as something good—like trees or flowers," said Dr. Maynard.

"Or poison ivy," I said.

"Creation of life that will continue isn't an accident that occurs often," Dr. Maynard said. "It was only by the grace of God and a few brave men that we stopped it from continuing this time. I consider myself fortunate in having seen it. A billion years have passed since the last time it happened and it may be another billion years before conditions are right for a repeat performance. Considering the possible forms of life—not always life as we know it—we're lucky it doesn't happen oftener. But we can't call our victory final."

"Eleven of us weren't very happy," I said.

Dr. Maynard nodded solemnly. "Even Jack and Ruby should be remembered as martyrs. What they did was not their doing as a man and a woman, but under compulsion. And it was really Jack who saved us, because he had enough of himself to win out."

"All Ruby had left was jealousy," I said.

"I don't suppose it will make much difference in a hundred years," said Maynard. "The energy they lost—their lives—was not destroyed. It may return someday."

"You sound like a Brahmin."

"There's a lot of truth in all religions," said Maynard. "I told you I was a very religious man. More so than many church goers. And at least, I'm on friendly terms with my God."

"I hope we all are," I said, and squeezed Janet's hand.

She squeezed back.

**THE END**

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